

we? But if it is God's word, then let us not keep it to ourselves. Let us copy the attitude of the centurion. Let us assemble who we can, so that they might share the blessing too.

Expository thoughts on
The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 7 (Chapter 9:20-10:33)

Grace Church Belper

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Acts 9:20-25

20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. 21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. 23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

When Saul became a missionary, he would preach that the man in Christ is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Old things have passed away. All things have become new! In these verses we see what happened with Saul. What effect did conversion have for him? What does a man who is filled with the Spirit (v17) look like?

Let us notice the great features of Saul's preaching. Luke says, "he preached the Christ". He declared Jesus' true identity, saying "that he is the Son of God" (v20). This is true *Christian* preaching. And it is what a fallen and depraved world needs to hear. If the greatest problems we had were politics, then political preachers would be fine. If the human race had only problems of organising and managing, then helpful advice would be all it needed. If our main difficulty was that we can get down sometimes, then preaching aiming mainly at making people happy would be good. But this is not how it is. We have a problem which is infinitely more serious. We are sinners, who have offended a holy God. We have a fallen and perverted nature which is abominable to our maker and judge. We are guilty, and exposed to the eternal punishment which infinite perfection and justice requires. Our need is of a Saviour. We need a Messiah to visit this world to rescue our cursed race. We need God himself to have mercy on us. Jesus, the Christ, having come to earth and having died for sins, we need to hear of him. We need to know that a way of forgiveness has been made. We need to understand that God receives sinners through his Son. There is one who can reconcile man and God. One in whom we can stand perfect in righteousness before God on the last day. This is what we need - and so this is what a true Christian preacher declares. Every soul that is truly alive must agree. If we have felt our guilt and need - if we have felt the power of the blood of Christ to forgive and cleanse - then how can we not?

It would be very good for the church if more preachers took notice of Saul's practice. He preached up Jesus. He urged people to call on his name. He argued with skill and zeal, proving from the Old Testament that Jesus was the promised Messiah (v22). He pointed people to the Son of God. We must remember that when we start to lose our way in spiritual things, it is because we have lost sight of Christ. We have forgotten his work at Calvary, and ignored the fact that he is risen from the dead. He have become unmindful of our union with him, and failed to remember that he is returning to judge the living and the dead. Let us repent of our slow and dull hearts, and fix our eyes again

words in verse 31 do not mean that Cornelius was already saved. He had not earned his way into God's favour with his good deeds. If anything, this passage proves the very reverse. Having come so far, he was still unconverted. He needed a gospel preacher to come and explain. He still needed to hear of Jesus Christ. He needed to have his eyes opened, and receive the Spirit of God. He had many confused ideas. When this Jewish man came to him, he worshipped him like a god. He had to be rebuked. He needed just to sit and listen, so that he might learn. He knew nothing that could teach Peter; he must simply be quiet and learn.

Many foolish things are said today about the religions of the world. It is said that they are all the same, and lead to the same God. All are said to have their own insights, and none are unique. Truth is like a mountain, with many paths up the side. We are all groping together after God, and none should say that there is only one way. The Bible knows nothing of these kinds of ideas. It is true that there is knowledge about God throughout the whole world. The creator is still declared in his creation (Psalm 19). The image of God still remains in man (James 3:9, 1 Corinthians 11:7). But this knowledge cannot save. Salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). None can come to the Father except through him. He alone has come down from heaven (John 6:38). He alone reveals the Father to us (Matthew 11:27). He is the one and only Son of God (John 1:14, 18). A man might be very sincere. His life might be outwardly blameless. He might practise prayer, and be full of good deeds. But these things are not the knowledge of Christ. They cannot replace Jesus' precious blood. They do not bring down the Holy Spirit, or substitute for saving faith. They cannot make do instead of bowing to Jesus as Lord. Cornelius was as pious a man as any man can be. But he did not know Christ. God must take special steps to reveal him to him. We cannot be satisfied with any man's religion. We must not be satisfied with our own. We must ask, if there is real trust in Jesus Christ. We must ask if he is consciously known and served. We must look for real understanding and faith in him. Only then can we be satisfied that we are dealing with one of God's saints.

Let us learn from Cornelius' example *that we ought to bring many to hear the word of God*. Cornelius was not a converted man. But not everything that saved people do is wise; and not everything that unsaved people do is wrong. Cornelius had a little light - and he used it well. When an angel directed him to Peter, he did not keep it for himself. He did not wait on his own, but called his family and friends too (v24). When Peter came, he found "many who had come together" (v27). They had had to wait several days, but a number were "all present before God" to hear what he had to say (v33).

Whatever stage we are at, we must have the same attitude. The word of God must have the first place. When it is preached, we must be there to hear. And if we know it is God's word, we should try to bring others to listen. No doubt many will not care. Probably some very near to us will think of us as fools. But what we can do, let us do. When we come to die, an account will be required from us. Let it not be said that we had treasure, but kept it to ourselves. Let us not be accused of keeping secret the most precious things of all. God has given us families, and neighbours, and friends. If we need to be saved, then so do they. They may not understand everything they hear. Do

rules it by *his word*. This is so very important. Everywhere around us today, people are saying that they have had enough of preaching and the word. They want something new in the churches. The music is always increasing. They bring in this and that to improve on what God gave. But the word gets less and less. But without the word, nobody can be saved. How can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Romans 10:14). The book of Acts is quite clear. God's way of saving people is through preaching - preaching about the person and works of God's Son. We must not long for miracles. We must not think we are missing out without mighty signs. We must listen to what is said about God's Son. We must pray that God will bless it to save souls. We must be sure that this, and this only, is God's way.

Acts 10:24-33

24 And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. 28 Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. 29 Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" 30 So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, 31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.' 33 So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God."

Now at last, Cornelius and Peter meet. The Roman centurion meets the Galilean fisherman. The unconverted Gentile meets the loyal Jew. The seeker after God encounters the leading apostle of Jesus Christ. What it must have been to be there! Promises made thousands of years ago were now being fulfilled (Genesis 12:3). These words deserve our special attention. Christ's church contains millions of Gentiles. Cornelius was the very first.

Let us see first in Cornelius *a great mixture of knowledge and ignorance*. He was a true seeker after God. He earnestly desired to be saved. But as with many, his wisdom was combined with much misunderstanding and error. There was a lot of good in him. He truly revered Israel's God. He sought him with fasting and prayer. He gave to the poor, and sought to avoid greed. When the angel commanded him, he obeyed straight away. He did not only look to his own soul, but to his family and friends. But for all this, he still had a way to go. He had sought God - but not yet found him. The angels

on Jesus, the Lord.

Let us notice that such preaching will not always be popular. The Jews were very religious, but they did not like Saul's message at all (v23). They opposed it, but could not defeat it. And when they could not defeat the message, they turned to the messenger. If they could not refute him, they would kill him. His message drove them to this. This is what Spirit-filled preaching does. Some people, it drives to Christ. Others, it drives to madness. The word of God is like a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). It exposes things that would never otherwise be known. Underneath the most impressive displays of religion, there may be great wickedness. Only the word of God will show us the difference. Jesus Christ did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). Only when the final division has been made, will peace and righteousness reign on earth.

Let us see also in Saul *the power of true conversion*. When the people saw the change in him, they were astonished (v21). He had turned right around. Before, his very breath was full of murder (v1). Now, he could not be held back from preaching Christ. He had been the church's greatest earthly enemy. Now he was one of its most convinced friends. What was the difference? He had been converted.

There is a great deal today that passes for conversion, but is not. I do not wish to lay down any unbiblical rules. I know that in many, the work is slow. I know that often, the work is unseen, and only perceived after some time. Some come to Christ as very little children, and cannot remember anything before. But despite all this, it is certain that when a person is converted, they are not what they were before! They have a new attitude in their hearts to the Lord Jesus. What they previously cared nothing for, now they adore. What they previously opposed, now they love and pursue. They have been given a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). They have been born again (John 3:3). They have "purified their souls" (1 Peter 1:23). If words mean anything at all, then this means a remarkable change! We see it in Saul. We can only be happy if we see it too in ourselves. We are not what we would be, that is sure. But are we what we were?

Let us remark finally on *the godly wisdom of the believers*. Saul had been promised great suffering for Jesus' sake (v16). And now his life was in danger. When they knew this was so, they sent him away. When his preaching had been opposed, he had stayed and preached more and more. But when his life was at risk, he fled. This is the wisdom of God. If our witness is disliked, we must not be quiet. When the gospel is rejected, it must still be preached. Jesus has commanded us. But he has not commanded his missionaries to give up their lives when they can escape. If we are called on to deny the gospel, we must not. But if we can keep our lives without doing so, then we must. Putting oneself in needless danger is not Christian. It is foolish. Let us pray that God will give us wisdom in every situation to know what to do.

Acts 9:26-31

26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they

were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. 29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. 30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. 31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

Luke has been telling us about Saul. This chapter has been all about him. It has been all about the great change that occurred when Jesus Christ invaded his life. Saul more than anyone was used by God to bring the gospel to Europe. What a great deal we owe to God for him! Let us read these words as those who have a deep, personal interest in them.

The first thing we see in these words is *the sorry unbelief of the disciples at Jerusalem*. It was about three years since Saul had been converted (Galatians 1:18-19, the "many days" of verse 23). Surely many reports would have come back to Jerusalem. Where was the great persecutor? What about he who had travelled to Damascus to haul disciples back? What had happened to the famous young rabbi? Can we imagine that *nobody* had brought the good news to Jerusalem? Surely someone had heard the news in that time. But whether the disciples had heard many times or few, the evidence was now before their own eyes. Saul himself had returned. He had no prisoners with him. No-one had been dragged back to be jailed, or put to death. But Saul desired to join the disciples. He claimed to be one of them! He could tell them about a miraculous conversion, and his time with believers in Damascus. But for all this, they did not believe. They remembered what unconverted Saul had been like. They remembered the fear and the pain that he had caused. They thought of their brethren who had been scattered, or lost their lives. They forgot the great power of the Lord Jesus! They lost sight of the mighty change that had happened in their own lives. They disbelieved that such an enemy could be converted. They forgot that they themselves had been brought from death to life, and from Satan to God.

What a strange mixture we often find - even in the best of saints! The church at Jerusalem was no ordinary church. It had had the blessing of Pentecost. Its teachers were the twelve apostles. It had miracles and signs done in its midst. And yet for all this, when Christ did a great work, they did not believe it was so. Luke does not say a word to question whether they were true believers. That is the point. Even those who ought to know far better can give way to the most unreasonable of doubts. This is not something to excuse. It is not something that fails to grieve the Lord. But it is true none the less. Even after the most remarkable proofs of his power and care, our feeble hearts can give way. Let us not expect too much from man. Let us remember that he is weak and frail. Let us not write off our fellow believers because they seem to stumble. The question is not as to whether they stumble. The question is as to whether they rise again

of the LORD from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:2-3). Micah spoke the same words (Micah 4:1-2). When the Messiah came as the descendant of David, the Gentiles would seek him (Isaiah 11:10). Zechariah said, "Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. "Thus says the LORD of hosts; in those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you." (Zechariah 8:22). And here we see a wonderful fulfilment of these words. Here were Romans - the ruling class. Israel was under Rome's power and control. They were the servants of a centurion. Simon was to them an unlearned fisherman. Yet what are they coming to do? They are coming to ask him for his help. They have heard that God has a message for them. Their master feared the God of the Jews. He knew that God had chosen Jerusalem, and not Rome. An angel had told them to hear Peter preach. And so they went to ask this Jew to tell them about his God.

This scene is not unique in the Bible. It is there many times. It is there for a reason. The true God is the God who revealed himself to Israel. The gods of the nations are idols. The Bible does not say that whatever we call "god" really is. It tells us that Jehovah is God, and there is none else (Isaiah 45:5). At Jesus' birth, wise men came from the east to seek him. They were rich and he was poor, but they brought their gifts and worshipped him (Matthew 2:1-2). As Christ's death approached, certain Greeks came to Philip and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus" (John 12:20-21). And today, throughout the world, people are eager to hear what the Messiah from Nazareth has done. All these things have only one explanation. The Old Testament prophecies are the word of God. The Lord is our creator, our ruler and our judge. He spoke what he knew would happen, and we may completely trust him. Is this word not being fulfilled thousands of times? We live in very wonderful days. The gospel is going forward all round the world. Christianity is not limited to Judah. It is not only in Europe and the West that true believers are to be found. People have found Christ all over the world. In China, in Sudan, in the Congo, in South America the work is going forward very fast. This ought to encourage us very much. We can worship knowing that the Bible is the word of God. We can come together each week and know that there is a world-wide family of believers in Christ. And it all began here with Cornelius and Peter.

Let us notice secondly that *the gospel advances through words*. God did not instantly intervene to save Cornelius. He did not make him a Christian on the spot. He sent an angel, but even this angel did not make him a new man. He was a god-fearing and devout man - but even yet, there was something he needed to *hear*. He must have a preacher, who must explain to him about Jesus Christ. The preacher would be a mere man, who would use normal human words. But those words would contain heavenly truths. With power, those words would save his soul.

We must never fail to notice this. There are many miracles in the book of Acts. But never did the miracle save. Signs drew attention to the preached word. Angels directed men to listen to the message. Rulers saw great things, but were astonished by the teaching they were hearing (Acts 13:12). This is how Christ's kingdom advances. He

deeply to be dealt with by such trivial measures. Holiness must begin in the heart. It must start with the new birth, and love to Christ. It must consist in acting so as to please him. It cannot be helped by treating God's good creation as evil. It can only go forward when we use everything rightly, with prayer and thanks. The Bible strictly warns against "holiness" which is different to this. It is a sign of apostasy and unbelief. We must avoid it (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Let the praise of God come first from our hearts. When we begin rightly, everything else can take its proper place.

Acts 10:17-23

17 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. 18 And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.

19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. 20 Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." 21 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?" 22 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." 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

We must always remember what the book of Acts is. It is the account of how the church began. It begins in Jerusalem, with a small huddle of Jews. It ends up in Rome, the centre of the empire, with believers of every nation. It is the story of the works of the ascended Christ. It tells us all that Jesus continued to do and teach, through the apostles (Acts 1:1). At every stage, Luke makes it clear that Christ was building his church. The apostles did not plan the advance of the kingdom. The Holy Spirit led them in it. We see this very clearly here. Peter wondered what the vision meant. He needed to be prompted to go with the Gentile men. The Holy Spirit had to intervene with a special word. His own understanding needed to be deepened. Christ was still leading him into all truth (John 16:13).

We must see in these verses *a striking fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy*. God's dealings under the Old Covenant were all with one people. God made a covenant with Israel. He took the descendants of Jacob as a special people. He did not chose all the nations of the world. But at that time, he also spoke clearly of something future. He said that the Gentiles would come and seek for Israel's God. He said that the nations would seek out the Jewish Messiah, and worship through him. Isaiah the prophet wrote, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD' house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word

(Proverbs 24:16).

Let us see secondly *the great turn-around that Luke brings to our attention*. A couple of pages ago, Stephen was preaching to the Hellenists. He disputed boldly with them, and they attempted to kill him. They succeeded too - and Saul was right at the heart of it (8:1). But now, the hunter had become the hunted. Saul now stood in Stephen's place. He preached to the Hellenists too. His preaching was filled with the Spirit and very bold (v29). They could not resist his words any more than Stephen's (6:10). As with Stephen, they rejected the message, and hated the messenger. As with Stephen, his life was now at risk. But the will of God is very mysterious, and very strange! It was the Lord's will that Stephen should be martyred. But it was his will that Saul should escape. How much Saul must have thought about this in later years! (1 Timothy 1:13-14, 1 Corinthians 15:9). Justice might demand that just as Saul had seen Stephen die, so Saul should die too. But God had mercy upon him. Let us adore the great wisdom of God! We cannot trace it out. He does not disclose his reasons to us. But let us, whenever we receive some mercy, not fail to give him the thanks and praise. If God has spared us, then let us wonder "Why me?", and adore him that he ever remembered us.

The contrast between Saul and Stephen is not the only one in this chapter. We must also see *how the Lord delivered his church*. There is a great difference between the beginning and end of this section. At the beginning, the disciples were persecuted, and afraid. At the end, they have peace and are edified (v31). At the start, they had a great enemy. At the end, that enemy has become a great friend. In verse 1, he is breathing out murder against them. In verse 29, he is boldly preaching their faith. As the chapter opens, the church is threatened with being decimated and scattered. As it closes, the number of disciples is being multiplied. Before the persecution began, there was one church, in Jerusalem. But the outcome was that there were "churches throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria" (v31) - and in Damascus too. How had all of this happened? Not through any clever scheme from Jerusalem. Not through the brilliance or genius of the apostles. It had happened through the sheer sovereignty of God. No man had planned it. The risen Lord Jesus, keeping his promise (1:8), had accomplished it.

Here is great encouragement for the believer! When the night looks very dark - the dawn may be just about to break. God is well able to bring triumph out of disaster. He loves to do so - that the glory may all be his. He advances his kingdom - and no man can take the credit. The church looks about to die - but fresh blessing arrives from heaven. We must take this to heart. We cannot despair and give up when things look hard. Things have often looked that way. But God is at work. The Lord Jesus Christ is reigning. He is building his church. There will be better times ahead - if we persevere. We must never say "I cannot take any more". We must say "The Lord will give grace for today, and tomorrow and next week can worry about themselves" (Matthew 6:34). Let us trust in the one who sees all things. He gave his Son - to the death of the cross. How will he not, with him, give us all things? (Romans 8:32).

Acts 9:32-43

32 Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. 33 There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralysed. 34 And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately. 35 So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. 36 At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. 37 But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay coming to them. 39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. 43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

We must not fail to understand the importance of these verses. Luke is about to tell us about the conversion of the first non-Jews. Are you a non-Jew? Then these verses ought to be deeply interesting! Peter is going to see the first Gentiles converted. But how did it come about? How did Peter get to that part of the world? These words tell us these things, and more besides. Let us read them expecting to be blessed.

Let us see in these two great healings *remarkable demonstrations of Christ's power to save*. There are many healings in the New Testament. And no two are alike. This is not by accident. Each miracle is teaching us something about the Lord. Each time a wonder was performed, it told the witnesses something new about the gospel and the way of salvation. Christ's miracles were pictures of saving power. They were performed upon bodies. But they tell us much about how he heals a soul.

We do not know if Aeneas was a believer. Dorcas definitely was (v36). But for Aeneas, we do not know. But the miracle performed on him made certain things very clear. Saving power comes through the name of Jesus, the Christ. We should not look to man. We should not trust in our own religious deeds. We cannot look to good works. Salvation is a direct act of God, through his Son. If we receive any good to our souls, it will be through Jesus.

Aeneas learnt too that Jesus' power to save is unlimited. He had been paralysed for eight years. He could not get out of his bed. But when Christ worked, he was healed immediately. At that very moment, he got out of his bed. It was a remarkable work of

Messiah had come for all nations, not only one. He was to unite Jew and Gentile in a single church. There would be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free - all would stand on the same level, through Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). At the cross he had taken the two human families, and made them one (Ephesians 2:15). Peter was learning all this. He had heard it before. But now the time was come. God knew Peter's limits. He would not send him to Cornelius unprepared. An angel was sent to Cornelius. But a vision was sent to Peter too.

Here is something which we must learn. God is not only working through Christians. He is working in them too. He has a purpose to use us to advance his kingdom. But we are part of that kingdom too. There must be an advance in us. We must grow in grace, and bear fruit for him. Let us not complain or grumble when we go through hard times. God is preparing us for something. We may not know it at the time. We may like Peter have to wonder just what it means (v17). But God knows. Let us humble ourselves under God's hand, and let him have his way.

We must learn too that there are no distinctions in Christ. Every believer has the same privileges before him. Each one is washed in the same blood. Each one is a child of God, and a co-heir with Christ. Every one can go to the Father in prayer, and plead the same promises. Whether Jew or Gentile, man or woman, adult or child - they all have the same privileges before him.

Let us see too that even an apostle needed to learn a simple lesson. He had been with Christ himself for 3 years. He had been taught by the Son of God. He had seen the Saviour risen from the dead. He had received the Holy Spirit in power. He was an apostle of the Lord. But he did not know everything. He had some basic truths still to learn. We must never think of ourselves as having learnt all we need. We must never imagine that we have arrived! We must ever be little children, confessing that our understanding is very small. God's mind is far greater than we could ever conceive. Let us be humble, and always ready to learn.

Let us understand finally that *the whole created world is good, and to be enjoyed when used rightly*. God is the creator of everything. There is no material thing except what was spoken into being by him. All things were made by him, and when he had finished he called it all "very good" (Genesis 1:31). There is no physical thing which is always evil. Everything has some good use to which it can be put - and God given thanks. This was the lesson which God was teaching Peter. For a time, it was necessary for the Jews to live separately. For a period, they had distinctive laws to mark them out. But that was never part of God's permanent will. It did not reflect real evil in the things that were forbidden to them. When the time came, all such laws were taken away.

Here is something that we must take to heart. There have been many who have thought that holiness and pleasing God is about *things*. Do not touch this; do not eat that. Do not go here; do not be seen there. If we deny ourselves this, and force ourselves to do that, then we shall become holy, and approved by God. We must beware of thinking this way. Man-made rules can never be pleasing to God. Our sin is rooted far too

Every true saint of God ought to marvel at God's sovereign grace. There are thousands around us who don't believe. If God had left us to our own way, we would be just like them. But God did not pass us over. He passed over multitudes - but fixed his love upon us. He appointed a time for us. We might have thought that we sought and found God - but really it was the other way round. God knew the time and the place. He chose and loved us.

Let us take heart from this. God has chosen a vast multitude for himself. Every one of them will be saved. The gospel's success does not depend upon man. It belongs to the ruling king. Praise his name!

Acts 10:9-16

9 The next day day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10 Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." 15 And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." 16 This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

Luke's record of the first Gentile convert is a very full one. It was a ground-breaking event in the church. It would bring much difficulty and controversy. Its effects would be felt for years to come. More than half the New Testament deals with the things that came out of it. It is an event which concerns us very deeply - both personally, and if we would learn from the Scriptures.

Let us see firstly *God's perfect providence*. He intended Peter to preach to Cornelius. His will was for Cornelius to be converted through the apostle's preaching. But before any of that could happen, he must prepare the way. Not only did Cornelius need to know who he should hear. Peter needed to be prepared to go to him and preach. God not only had a work to do in Cornelius to convert him. God also had a work to do in Peter to bring him on.

What a hard lesson it must have been for Peter! For a lifetime, he had been immersed in the Jewish laws. Every moment he could remember, he had been bound by them. He had never eaten anything unclean. He had never had fellowship with an uncircumcised man. He had always revered the laws of Moses. They came from God. They were given to Israel. He was a servant of God, and belonged to that nation. His conscience was always bound. But now, he needed to learn something new! The death of Christ had brought in a great change. He had revealed that true uncleanness could only come from within. Every outward thing had been made pure (Mark 7:19). His death had ended all merely ceremonial laws. The time of Israel was coming to an end. The

power. Those who knew him were amazed. A great number "turned to the Lord" (v35).

Dorcas tells us that no case is too hard for the Lord. With him nothing is impossible. He raises even the dead! There is no sinner who Christ lacks the power to save. Whatever you have done, whatever you have been - he cannot be defeated. He is able. Do not ask yourself if Christ can save you. Ask yourself if you have been to him, and yielded to him that you might be saved.

We see secondly in these verses *the great value which God puts upon good works*. There are very few people raised from the dead in the Bible. Of such miracles performed by the apostles, there are only two. We never read in the whole of Scripture that any apostle was raised from the dead. No missionary or pastor ever came back to life. Tabitha was not remarkable as a scholar, or a theologian. But she was renowned for her "good works and charitable deeds" (v36) - and God brought her back from the dead. Without her, the church at Joppa would suffer a great loss. The people were devastated when she died (v39). And God returned her to them. Is this not very remarkable? Does it not speak very clearly? God does not put any store by our great gifts and talents. We do not have any that we did not first receive from him! Why should he be impressed by them? But God does put great weight upon acts of humble service and love. We may have every gift - but only love is of value to him (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Here is a great encouragement to every believer. We may not have great talents or profound minds. But we have opportunity to serve, and to love. We can do ordinary things for ordinary people. We may not be able to give millions of pounds. But we can give our hearts, and use our hands. It is God's will that all believers in every place should be full of good works (Ephesians 2:10). They are the fruit of our salvation. They are the proof that we truly belong to Jesus. They are pleasing in his sight. God does not forget his saints. They are very precious and valuable in his sight. Whatever they are in the world, if the love of Jesus was in them, God will remember them. This is the message of Dorcas.

Let us see finally from this passage *what conversion is*. There are two descriptions of it here. Both at Lydda and Sharon, and at Joppa, there were great numbers of people saved. And Luke describes just what they did. He says that those at Lydda and Sharon "turned to the Lord". In conversion, we turn to the Lord. We turn away from our own ways. We cease to consider ourselves as answerable to none. We acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the king. We stop trusting our own wisdom, and we bow to him. Our question is like Paul's, "what would you have me to do?" (v6). In a word, we repent. Without repentance, nobody is truly saved. At Joppa, Luke tells us that "many believed on the Lord". Those who are converted, believe. They hear and understand that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Saviour of lost men and women. They learn and trust that his death on the cross is the price paid for sins. They know and rely on him as risen from the dead, at the right hand of God. The gospel is not just a story to them any more. It is reality, to which they have entrusted all. They do not just believe teachings and ideas - they trust the Lord himself. They look to him as a personal Saviour, alive and ready to

save.

This is what conversion is. It is something we must be very clear on. A wrong step here could ruin our souls. We may not be able to understand very complex things. But we ought to be straight on this. If we would be saved, we must repent and believe. If we want to receive the Holy Spirit, and come into the family of God, we must yield and trust. This is what Jesus calls us to do. Have we done so?

Acts 10:1-8

1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" 4 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. 5 Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. 6 He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do. 7 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. 8 So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

These words ought to be very precious to us. In them, the first non-Jew in the Christian church is named. Here is the first man who was ever added to the gathered people of God, without being circumcised. If we are Gentiles, and part of God's church, then this man was the first. We might take it for granted. But then, it was earth-shattering. Luke has taken care to record this first conversion at great length. He has done so for a reason. Let us study it with the same care.

Let us first see from Cornelius that *a man may be very sincere and pious, without being converted*. This is something which we can easily make a mistake with. We see a man who is very earnest. He is generous. He fears God. He is devout. He prays. He lives a blameless life. And then we suppose that he is in the kingdom of God. But we may be very much mistaken. Nobody is saved by their good efforts. To fear God and to be sincere is a far smaller thing than we imagine. Because we see so much godlessness, we are pleased to find a God-fearing man. But we should not imagine that all who fear God are saved. Salvation comes through faith in Christ. Cornelius of course was not yet saved. That is why the gospel must be sent to him! That is why an apostle must come, and tell of Jesus Christ! That is why an angel comes to him, to explain how he might hear. Then he can be converted; then he can be saved.

It is very easy to be fooled. We imagine that because we have a little religion, therefore we are the friends of God. We look at the world, and see gross wickedness and sin. And then we say, that because we are not so bad (we think), therefore we must be very good. But God sees far deeper than we do. His standards are of perfection. His holy nature

cannot tolerate the smallest appearance of sin. His holy justice will not leave the slightest offence unpunished. The unconverted condition is far more dire than we imagine. It needs more than a few good deeds here and there to patch it up. A whole new nature is required. A great work of God is needed, to give us true spiritual life. The blood of Christ must be applied to our souls. The Holy Spirit must visit us in life-giving power. We must be united to the Son of God. We must have an atonement made for our sin. There is far more to conversion than the unsaved person expects.

Let us not be easily satisfied in these things. Many have mistaken some outward good thing for true spiritual life. It is true that we cannot see the heart. We must not become judges of each other, or be hasty to condemn. But let us be quite sure, that true Christianity must be full of Christ. He is the Saviour. He is the Lord. If a person's religion is not all about him, then we may doubt that it has any reality at all.

Let us notice secondly *that God's eyes are everywhere, and he sees everything, and his mercies are very kind*. Cornelius might have wondered whether there could be any mercy for him. He was not born into the chosen race. He was a Roman, and had not become a Jew. Circumcision was open to him, but he was unwilling to yield to it. Yet he knew that the God of Israel was real, and feared him. He prayed, at the regular Jewish times of prayer. He sought to do the good deeds which the law of Moses commanded. But could he be saved, when he would not go the whole way? The answer is there for us in the text. The angel said that his deeds had come up before God (v4). They had been seen, and noted. They had not earned anything from God; for like every work, they were tainted with sin. They could not purchase salvation, because there is no price that can be put on a soul (Psalm 49:7-9). But even so, God had taken notice of them, and was now sending the good news of his Son. Now, Cornelius would hear of the one who had paid the infinite price. Though he had not done all that he could, yet God saw a seeking heart, and would take him as his own.

What remarkable mercy God has! We must never take it for granted. God is sovereign, and may give or keep back as he pleases. But his mercy is very great. He is very tender. He will not crush the bruised reed, or put out the smoking flax (Isaiah 42:3). Where a work of his grace has begun, he will bring it through to completion. He will not cast us off, though we have done far less than we ought. Cornelius and every other Gentile should have come to Judaism. But in God's kindness, the gospel would now come out to them. Let us take a moment to dwell on this great mercy.

Let us see finally *God's sovereignty in the spread of the gospel*. This has been Luke's point throughout the book. The advance of the kingdom was not the work of man. It was not Peter who went to find Cornelius. It was God who had already gone far ahead. It was not the apostles who determined that now the Gentiles should be saved. It was the risen Lord Jesus who was building his church. Surely there were many who feared God before Cornelius. Surely there were many Gentiles who bowed to the God of Israel. But only now had God's time come. Only to this man had the moment arrived. In Caesarea, Cornelius would be the first to be gathered in.