

The Book of Acts

The Ministry of Peter

Lesson #6 for August 11, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 9:32-43; 10:9-16; 11:1-26; 12:1-18; Ephesians 2:11-19.

1. After the dramatic conversion of Saul/Paul, the Christian church was on the road to a much more invigorated effort to spread the gospel. But, before we focus on Paul and his activities, we must discuss some details in the story of Peter. This lesson will focus on the steps that took place in changing Peter from a Galilean Jew to a Christian evangelist.
2. Anyone who carefully reads the New Testament will recognize that the conversion of Gentiles to become Christians was, without doubt, the most controversial issue in the apostolic church. We know that there were 3½ years between the crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus Christ and the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7-8:1) which triggered the terrible persecution of Christians. The scattering of those same Christians carried the gospel to other areas of the world.
3. While Paul was preaching the gospel in Tarsus—about which we know almost nothing—the church in Antioch was growing exponentially. Unfortunately, even that long after the death and crucifixion of Jesus Christ and even among the Jewish believers scattered to other areas, **they still felt that it was their task to spread the gospel only to other Jews.** However, a few of them like Philip in Samaria had moved beyond those restrictions.
4. Clearly, Peter was one of the leaders of the Christian group still at Jerusalem. We do not know exactly how the disciples who were still dwelling in or around Jerusalem managed to avoid the persecution started by the stoning of Stephen. However, Jerusalem was still considered to be the headquarters of the Christian church. God needed to take some fairly dramatic steps to get those Jewish believers to take seriously the commission to spread the gospel to the Gentiles.
5. While Peter had a home at Capernaum and a wife and presumably a family living there, our story picks up with Peter traveling around Judea and spreading the gospel. Perhaps his children were grown and his wife traveled with him; but, we do not know that for sure. See 1 Corinthians 9:5 where it specifically says that Peter traveled around with his wife. In any case, Peter traveled among the villages and towns along the coast of Judea.
6. Read Acts 9:32-35; compare Luke 5:17-26. The very brief account of the healing of Aeneas at Lydda caused a great rejoicing among the believers in Lydda and Sharon. Many people were added to the church. What similarities do you see between this story and the story of Christ healing the paralytic while Jesus was preaching at the home of Peter in Capernaum? Notice, for example, that Jesus told the young man in Capernaum to take up his bed and go home. Peter told Aeneas, “Get up and make your bed.” (Acts 9:34, *GNB**)
7. No doubt, this miracle was a stepping stone to what happened next. Read Acts 9:36-43. Compare Luke 8:41-42,49-56. No doubt, the believers in Joppa had heard the story of Aeneas at Lydda. Perhaps earlier, Peter had even gone to Joppa to help the church there. In any case, when Dorcas died, their thoughts immediately turned to Peter; they wondered if he could help them. What Peter did is very reminiscent of what Jesus had done in the raising of Jairus’s daughter at Capernaum.
8. Once again, this miracle of raising a dead woman back to life must have caused a great stir in Joppa. Peter, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, realized that this was a great opportunity to spread the gospel. He did something very interesting in that context: He moved into the home of Simon, a tanner, who lived by the sea.

9. For those who are familiar with the restrictions that God had placed on the Jews regarding dealing with dead creatures, one must realize that being a tanner and dealing, every day, with dead animals was a significant departure from the strict rules of Pharisaical Judaism.
10. Try to imagine what would happen in your community if either of these two miracles had taken place in your town or city. For example, what would happen if Jesus should appear one day and walk through a major hospital like Loma Linda University Health and heal everyone in the hospital. Given the general animosity toward Christianity, how would such an event be reported in the newspapers and on television? If everyone in the hospital was healed and went home, what would happen in that hospital over the next few days?
11. Why do we not see many miracles in our day? We have clear scriptural evidence of the fact that miracles will be performed as we approach the second coming of Jesus Christ. But, Ellen White warned us that the performance of miracles is not God's way of working right now because the Devil would try to duplicate them, and people would become even more confused. However, that is what will happen at the very end of time.

John 20:24-29: ²⁴ One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!"

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 20:24–29). New York: American Bible Society.

12. As we know, there are many people today who preach on major programs on television, claiming that they have the ability from Jesus Christ to heal the sick. Healing the sick is such a great way to get people's attention and to attract them to the gospel. Why doesn't God empower people to do that in our day? Why did Jesus say to Thomas: "Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!" (John 20:29, *GNB**) How many people today would be Christians if each one demanded the evidence that Thomas demanded? What about us? Do we need that kind of evidence in order to believe? Don't we have sufficient evidence? Wouldn't miracles be a great attraction today?

God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ** 105.2.

13. God had gradually convinced Peter that not all of the Pharisaical restrictions that he had grown up with were necessary for a Christian evangelist. As we noted, Peter was staying

with a tanner on the coast at Joppa. Apparently, God was ready then to make His next big move in trying to get the gospel to the Gentiles.

14. Read Acts 10:1-48. This incredible story which should be familiar to every believing Christian led to some major changes among the Christian believers. But, it was not easy.
15. It is very clear that this vision was not about what kind of food was safe or good to eat. Clearly, it was about what kind of people we can relate to. Why do you think such a dramatic vision was necessary to break down Peter's prejudice against Gentiles?
16. Read Genesis 12:1-3. Why were Abraham and his descendants given the land of Palestine as their home? Wasn't it specifically for the purpose of giving them a platform from which to reach out and convert the nations—the Gentiles?
17. As anyone knows who has carefully read the New Testament, the Jews considered the fact that they were *the circumcised* as setting them apart from Gentiles who were *the uncircumcised* and, thus, unclean. Hellenistic Christian believers were already starting to recognize that the gospel needed to go to Gentiles. For example, look at Paul's statements in places like Titus 2:11; Galatians 3:26-29; and Ephesians 2:11-19.

Titus 2:11: For God has revealed his grace for the salvation of the whole human race.—*Good News Bible*.*

Galatians 3:26-29: ²⁶ It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. ²⁷ You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. ²⁸ So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.—*Good News Bible*.*

18. What further steps did God take to make sure there could not be any question about the fact that He wanted the gospel to be carried to Gentiles? Read again **Acts 10:44-48**.
19. It is very clear that at the time of Pentecost, the disciples were given the gift of tongues so that—as we have noted in earlier lessons—they could speak the gospel clearly and convincingly in any language in any area where they traveled. Why do you think the gift of tongues was given to Cornelius and his family? Did they become carriers of the gospel? We know nothing about their subsequent lives. Notice again these words from Ellen White regarding the gift of tongues.

“There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” During the dispersion the Jews had been scattered to almost every part of the inhabited world, and in their exile they had learned to speak various languages. Many of these Jews were on this occasion in Jerusalem, attending the religious festivals then in progress. Every known tongue was represented by those assembled. **This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied the deficiency of the apostles. The Holy Spirit did for them that which [40] they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime. They could now proclaim the truths of the gospel abroad, speaking with accuracy the languages of those for whom they were laboring. This miraculous gift was a strong evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven. From this time forth the language of the disciples was pure, simple, and accurate, whether they spoke in their native tongue or in a foreign language.**—Ellen

G. White, *Acts of the Apostles** 39.2-40.0. [Bold type is added.]

20. It should not be a surprise to anyone who understands Jewish prejudices to recognize that once Peter returned to Jerusalem, there was a big uproar. Review Peter's account of his experience as recorded in Acts 11:1-18. Peter had six believers to confirm what he said.
21. This experience recognizing that the Holy Spirit had actually come upon Cornelius and his family in such a remarkable way should have eliminated Jewish prejudice. But, it was not so. They initially seemed to agree that "God had given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent to live!" (Acts 11:18, *GNB**)
22. Read **Acts 11:19-21**: ¹⁹Some of the believers who were scattered by the persecution which took place when Stephen was killed went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, **telling the message to Jews only**. ²⁰But other believers, who were from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to Gentiles also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.—*Good News Bible*.* [Bold type is added.]
23. So, how did the gospel really start moving among Gentiles?
24. Dr. Luke, himself a Greek Gentile, did something interesting in Acts 11. He moved from this story recounting Jewish prejudice directly to the story of what was happening in Antioch where Hellenistic Christian believers from Cyprus and Libya (Cyrene) had gone to Antioch and **began to openly preach the gospel to Gentiles**. We do not even know the names of those first Christian missionaries to Gentiles.

The time had come for an entirely new phase of work to be entered upon by the church of Christ. The door that many of the Jewish converts had closed against the Gentiles was now to be thrown open. And the Gentiles who accepted the gospel were to be regarded as on an equality with the Jewish disciples, without the necessity of observing the rite of circumcision.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 136.2. [Bold type is added.]
25. The church at Antioch became a great center for the Christian church. As the gospel was growing rapidly in Antioch, the Christian leaders at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to find out what was happening. Barnabas, after helping in that great growth for a while, recognized that he needed more help; he went to Tarsus, which was not far away, to recruit Paul. Thus was formed the first great evangelistic duo for those famous missionary trips involving Paul.
26. Why do you suppose we have the note in Acts 11:26 that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called *Christians*? Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. It was a thriving city near the coast in Syria. People from all over the civilized world went there. As the gospel was widely preached to people from all kinds of backgrounds including many Gentiles, those who opposed the growth of the Christian church began mocking these new "Christians" who, they claimed, were following a dead man who was crucified as a traitor to the Roman government!
27. Earlier in the book of Acts, we find believers referred to as *brethren*, (Acts 1:16) *disciples*, (Acts 6:1) even *saints*. (Acts 9:13) But, it was at Antioch that they were first called *Christians*. In our day, of course, Christians are known around the world. By the time of the writing of the book of Acts, Christianity was widely recognized. (Acts 26:28)
28. What does it mean to you today to be called a Christian? Do you hide your Christianity? Do you actually live a life that is different in some distinct ways because you are a Christian? If you were put on trial for being a faithful Seventh-day Adventist Christian, would there be

enough evidence to convict you?

29. Are Christians and Christian standards respected in our world today? Societies in the so-called western or developed world are racing to rid themselves of Christian standards in every way possible. The communist world has done everything possible for years to eliminate Christian ideas, beliefs, and standards. Authorities in Muslim and even Hindu areas are persecuting Christians every day.
30. Read Acts 12:1-18. In this chapter we come to the end of the discussion of Peter in the book of Acts. King Herod tried to endear himself to Jews in general, but especially to the Pharisees, by persecuting Christians. Initially, he arrested James, the brother of John, and had him beheaded. Thus, James became the first of the disciples to be martyred. Then, he arrested Peter. Peter was kept in prison until the feast of unleavened bread was over; at that time, Herod was hoping to make a major event out of the killing of Peter.
31. As you can imagine, the Christians in and around Jerusalem were praying earnestly for Peter's release. Read Acts 12:6-19.
32. This was not the first time Peter had been miraculously released from prison. This King Herod was Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod, the Great, who had tried to kill Jesus when He was still a baby. He ruled in Judea from A.D. 40-44. From what we know about Agrippa I from extra-biblical sources, the fact that he tried to ingratiate himself to the Jewish people by killing Christians fits perfectly. No doubt, Agrippa already knew that Peter had been freed from prison earlier. (Acts 5:17-20) That is probably why he took such extreme precautions to make sure that Peter did not escape from his custody!
33. This precaution by Agrippa served only to demonstrate, once again, the superiority of God's abilities in caring for those who are His faithful followers. The release of Peter from prison led to great rejoicing among the Christians in Jerusalem. But, Peter needed to leave that area immediately to prevent being re-arrested.
34. In the book of Acts, Dr. Luke followed that story with an account of what happened to Herod Agrippa shortly thereafter. Read Acts 12:20-23. This should have been a warning to those who wanted to try to stamp out Christianity in Judea.
35. So, what have we learned from these brief accounts about the work of Peter in Judea?

“In the tenth chapter of Acts we have still another instance of the ministration of heavenly angels, resulting in the conversion of Cornelius and his company. Let these chapters [8-10] be read, and receive special attention. In them we see that heaven is much nearer to the Christian who is engaged in the work of soulsaving than many suppose. We should learn through them also the lesson of God's regard for every human being, and that each should treat his fellow man as one of the Lord's instrumentalities for the accomplishment of His work in the earth.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1059.2.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, August 10 including brackets and content in brackets.]
36. Do we have cultural, social, political, or linguistic barriers that lead to tensions between groups and prevent us from freely spreading the gospel today? Do such barriers exist in the Christian church today? What has God done to remove such barriers in our day?
37. In studying the experience of Peter in this lesson, we need to remind ourselves of Peter's previous experiences with Jesus. Peter was always the outspoken one among the disciples. As recorded in Matthew 16, it was Peter who spoke up on behalf of the other disciples and declared: “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16, *GNB**) And he was commended by Jesus for those words. But, Jesus correctly recognized that Peter was

not the rock foundation (*petra*) that would be the foundation of the Christian church, but rather, he would be only a small stone (*petros*).

38. It is important to recognize after reading Acts 16:19 that it was not just Peter who was given the keys to the kingdom; it was all of the apostles. See Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23. Peter was the one who wanted to climb out of the boat and walk on the water. Then, when he turned around to look at the other disciples, in effect, saying, "Hey, look at me," he began to sink and was only saved by being rescued by Jesus. (Matthew 14:22-32) In the upper room, he swore with an oath that he would go with Jesus even to death. But, a short time later, he was swearing that he did not even know Jesus. See Luke 22:54-62. If Peter had stayed awake instead of sleeping as did James and John in the Garden of Gethsemane, he would not have made that mistake. (Matthew 26:36-46) But, in His usual fashion, Jesus re-established Peter's confidence after they returned to Galilee and before Pentecost.
39. How do you feel about Peter's ministry that we have studied today. Do you wish that we could have some evangelists among the Adventist organization that could heal people and maybe even raise people from the dead? Might that happen in the future? Of course, we must remember that these miracles were not done by Peter; they were done by God working alongside Peter. Could we have that same working relationship with God now?
40. Are there people like Cornelius in our world today who are reaching out to find something that they perhaps do not even recognize exists but are hoping for someone to help them discover the gospel? Could some of them live in your area? Could some even be people that you know? Are you prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the truths that you believe? Peter said that we should be. (1 Peter 3:15)
41. How do you feel about the vision Peter received on the roof in Joppa? We know that this passage has been used extensively in modern times to suggest that restrictions about diet are no longer necessary. Clearly, if we read Acts 10 and 11 together, that was not the reason for the vision on the roof.
42. What do you suppose attracted Cornelius to Judaism in the beginning. (Acts 10:2) What led him to believe that Judaism was a better religion than his pagan worship of emperors and pagan gods? Why do you think God chose to use Cornelius as a way of showing that the gospel needed to go to Gentiles as well as Jews? By the time Paul's ministry got into full swing, there could be no question about the fact that the gospel was intended for everyone. "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28, GNB*)
43. Review everything you know about the miracles that Jesus performed while Peter was present. Imagine yourself sitting among a group of Gentiles, hearing Peter talk about those miracles. How would it affect you? Think about Jesus helping Peter to catch a load of fish so heavy that it almost sank his boat. Think about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law and feeding 5000 men—not counting women and children. Think about the transfiguration, the healing of the 10 lepers, and the walk by the sea. Peter was there when Lazarus was raised from the dead. He probably saw the kiss of Judas and, of course, was among the disciples in the upper room when Jesus appeared after the resurrection. How do you suppose he talked about those events? Was there a glow on his face and in his voice as he did so?

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