

Unit 4, Lesson 29: Peter in the spotlight

Memory Verse: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:34, 35)

After Luke deals with the conversion of Saul, he goes right back to discussing the actions of Peter, someone who has been rather the main character in the book of Acts so far. He starts with two miracles Peter performed. “As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda.” (Acts 9:32) So far every time we've read about Peter he's been in Jerusalem. Now he's traveling about.

Lydda is on the road from Jerusalem to the ancient port of Joppa (soon to appear in our story) and only about ten miles away from Joppa. There Peter encounters Aeneas, a paralyzed man who had been bedridden for eight years.

“Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.”
Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. (Acts 9:34, 35)

Sharon is the name for the coastal plain around Lydda and Joppa, so this one miracle had a significant impact. But this was just a small foretaste of what was about to come. There was a woman believer in Joppa known for her deeds of compassion and kindness. Her name (Tabitha in Aramaic, which translates to Dorcas in Greek) meant gazelle.

This busy person came down sick and died. The believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda, so they sent two men to ask Peter to come to them. Peter agreed and went with the two men. When he got to Joppa they took him to the upstairs room where they had laid Tabitha's body. The people she had helped were in the room mourning. They showed Peter the things she had made for them before her illness.

Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. (Acts 9:40-43)

Two characteristics of these miracles suggest themselves. First, they were acts of compassion. Second, they served to attract attention to the “Way” and led more people to believe in Jesus.

We don't know how much time passed between this event and the next, but it was probably less than a week. Just before lunch time one day, Peter went up to the roof of Simon's house to pray. Luke tells us he was hungry and fell into a trance. While in that trance, Peter saw a large sheet of some sort let down by its four corners. Inside were all kinds of animals, including reptiles and birds. A voice told Peter to get up, kill, and eat.

Peter grew up as a devout Jew, who had never eaten any of the meats the Jews considered “unclean.” So in his trance he protested the order to kill and eat. The voice said again, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10:15) This happened three times and then the sheet was taken back up. As he awoke Peter realized it had been a dream, and he wondered what it meant.

Then the Holy Spirit told Peter there were three men at the gate to Simon's house and that he should go with them because the Spirit had sent them. Indeed, they had come from Caesarea, another seaport between Joppa and Tyre. They had been sent by Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Regiment. He was a God-fearing man who prayed regularly. He had a vision of an angel who told him to send for Peter.

The next day Peter went with them to Caesarea and, a day later, met Cornelius.

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

Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea. So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.'" (Acts 10:27-33)

So Peter preached to them, starting with the words of this lesson's memory verse. He told them about Jesus; his life, death, and resurrection.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some followers of Jesus criticized him. He had to defend his actions, and he used the evidence of the Holy Spirit's blessing to demonstrate that God was behind what had happened. This was enough to convince these critics, and they rejoiced that God had granted salvation even to Gentiles.

Herod then began persecuting the followers of Jesus. He arrested a few and had James, John's brother, executed. He saw that this pleased the Jews and arrested Peter, in order to execute him too. But during the night an angel came and delivered Peter from the prison. Herod had the guards executed, but not long after Herod himself died, and the gospel continued to advance.

Possible thought papers:

1. If you have access to Google Earth, look up Tel Aviv. Just south you will find Jaffa, the modern name of Joppa (it may help to turn off roads). East and a little south you will see Ben Gurion airport. South of that you will find Lod (the modern name of Lydda). How do you think this area was different in Peter's day?
2. When the people "spoke in tongues" at Cornelius' house was it actually other languages as on the day of Pentecost, or was it ecstatic utterance (glossolalia)? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Imagine you are one of Herod's prison guards. Write your feelings before your execution.