

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 10:17-23

Throughout our recent studies we have seen how the Holy Spirit has been working towards breaking down Peter's resistance to taking the Gospel to those who are not like him. We saw it with Peter's ministry to the Samaritans, as well as the Greek-Messianic centers in Lydda and Joppa.

But now, Peter must make the largest step. The Spirit has given him a vision of clean and unclean animals and has contradicted Peter's longstanding faithfulness to Jewish dietary laws.

As Peter considers the vision, the Spirit makes the next move in his plan for world evangelism. Let's look at what happens, starting in verses 17-18:

"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. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there."

This is obvious but let me state it anyways. Luke says that "Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision" he just had. The Greek phraseology is a bit stronger. It indicates that Peter was "inwardly perplexed, confused about what he had just seen in this "wide-awake" vision.

I bring this up because I cannot count how many times, I have heard people say something like this: "If God

gives you a vision, you'll know right away what it means." I can tell you that this has definitely not been my experience.

Visions and interpretations are not automatic. Look at Daniel's experience in Daniel 8:27:

"Then I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for several days. Afterward I got up and performed my duties for the king, but I was greatly troubled by the vision and could not understand it." - Daniel 8:27

The meaning of Old Testament and New Testament visions were not immediately understood by those who received them. In Peter's case he has this strange vision in which a voice tells him to break the long-standing dietary rules of the Jewish Law. It is not clear to him what he is supposed to take away from this vision.

Now let's look at a remarkable example of orchestration by the Holy Spirit. Just after Peter has this vision and is contemplating what it is supposed to mean, the delegation sent by Cornelius arrives at the gate to Simon's house and start calling out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

We can picture the scene, can't we. Three strangers from Caesarea Maritima are standing at the gate to Simon the Tanner's home. They can't just walk up to the house and knock on the door. Evidently, the house is set back some distance from the gate because they are having to "call out" to the inhabitants.

Now let me ask you a question. Given that was the first century, what are the chances that this delegation would arrive at just the moment Peter's vision has ended

and he is contemplating what it means? I mean, they didn't have a GPS that would tell them exactly what hour they needed to leave to get to Simon's house on time!

Remember, they left the day before. The Holy Spirit synchronized their journey and Peter's vision perfectly. Peter only had moments between the vision and the men calling for him from the gate. What are the mathematical probabilities that would happen?

John MacArthur relays a great story about the Holy Spirit's timing and a believer's obedience. I'll paraphrase it a bit, but here's the story:

A guy named Kenny Porter was walking across a street in Los Angeles. A policeman was standing on the corner and Porter had this impression that he should witness to him.

Well, he wrestled with that impulse. He kept wavering between, "Is that me thinking that, or is God telling me to do it?" Well, after some hesitation he walked out into the middle of the street and said something to the effect, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Savior?" Then he handed him a gospel tract.

The policeman looked at him and said, "How did you know I had been thinking about that?"

That's the same thing we are seeing in Acts 10. The Holy Spirit knows Cornelius is ready for the Good News, but He's got to get Peter ready as well. How many times has the Spirit wanted to move us towards someone who is ready for the Gospel? We've got to be sensitive to his

voice because others may be depending on our obedience.

Let's look at verses 19-20:

“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

Here we see further orchestration by the Spirit. As Peter is pondering the vision, three men are standing at the gate, asking for him. Meanwhile, the Spirit speaks to Peter and tells him the three men are looking for him, so he needs to get up and go downstairs.

Look at these words: “The Spirit said to him ...” I have to tell you, I think this is straightforward language. “The Spirit said to him ...” Unlike the vision Peter has just seen, this is a direct contact with specific instructions.

For all the folderal that can come with some ministries, at heart, I'm a simple guy. I don't require complicated theology. If Luke says the Spirit spoke to Peter, it probably means He spoke to him!

It's not the first time we've seen this in Luke's narrative. After leaving Samaria, as Philip was walking on the south road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza, he saw an Ethiopian Official riding in a covered wagon. According to Luke, what happened next? The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” – Acts 8:29

We will see this kind of language again in Acts 13. Luke tells us that, as a group of believers was worshipping and fasting, “The Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas

and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” - Acts 13:2

As I research the Bible, I find it interesting how many times commentators will sort of stumble when they get to these kinds of occurrences – especially in the New Testament. They will say something like, “Well, we don’t know what this means. We don’t know how the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter or Paul.”

If I told you that I spoke to my mother, what would you assume I meant? That I sent her a card, I emailed her, I sent her a text ... or I spoke to her? Why do some find it so hard to believe that the Holy Spirit simply spoke to Peter?

Now notice how specific the Spirit’s message was: “Peter, there are three men downstairs looking for you. Get up and go down to see them.”

The Spirit didn’t leave anything to guesswork, did He? Peter is on the roof, so he can’t see the men. The Spirit tells him there are three of them, and they are looking for him. We get a geographic transition here, as well. Peter is to get up ... but go downstairs. He has been on the rooftop, but now he must go to the main floor.

Let me pick up again at verse 20, because we have some hidden language there. Look at what Luke records at the end of the Spirit’s directions: “Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

In his commentary on Acts, John Stott reveals something that does not appear in the English translation. He notes that, in the original Greek, the phrase, “Do not hesitate” has an expanded meaning.

As Stott puts it, “The key expression *meœden diakrinomenos* in 10:20 and *meœden diakrinanta* in 11:12 is usually translated ‘without hesitation’ (RSV) or ‘without misgiving’, but it could mean ‘making no distinction’.”

Now isn't that interesting? While translators have typically translated that phrase as “not doubting”, or “not hesitating”, the text may mean something much deeper.

What was Peter's vision about? Clean and Unclean animals. Acceptable and Unacceptable animals. And at the end of the vision the Lord said to him, “Don't keep calling unclean what I have called clean.”

And now, (as Stott suggests) as three Gentiles are standing at Simon the Tanner's gates and asking for Peter, the Spirit says, “Don't make any distinctions”.

Doesn't that fit the narrative perfectly? All along, God has been trying to get the Church to make the first moves into Gentile territory ... and now the Spirit is telling Peter, “Don't make any arbitrary distinctions between yourself and the men standing at the gate calling for you.”

John Stott writes, “... Although the vision challenged the basic distinction between clean and unclean foods, which Peter had been brought up to make, the Spirit related this to the distinction between clean and unclean people and told him to stop making it.” – John Stott

There were some very good reasons for the Spirit to give Peter those instructions.

In the first-century Roman Empire, Judaism was what one person called, “a mysterious enigma”. Unlike other religions in the empire, Jews had no physical representations of their God—no idols or statues. With nothing to see or touch, many Romans classified Jews as “atheists”, while others considered Judaism as mysterious, if not, exotic.

The divide between the Jews and Gentiles was well known. As for the Jews, historically, some rabbis had taught that, while all of Abraham’s descendants would enter paradise, the Gentiles were destined to hell’s flames.

In Jewish society, if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl a funeral was held for him. The family no longer acknowledged him in any way. On the other side, in ancient history the Gentiles regarded the Jews as objects to be enslaved. Persecutions and even mass killings were not uncommon. In some Gentile communities, Jews were regarded as the “enemies of the human race”.

If there is any doubt as to the accuracy of these statements, let me read a quote from an ancient rabbi:

“All the nations and kingdoms that tormented and oppressed the Jewish people will come and see the happiness of the Jews, and turn to dust, and never return, as it is said: ‘The wicked shall see it and be grieved’ (Psalms 112:10).

You might think that because [some Gentiles] are going to remain alive in the time of the Messiah, they will also merit the World to Come. You must ... give heed to the words of the Torah, which ... says ... ‘No uncircumcised

individual shall eat of [the paschal sacrifice]' (Exodus 12:48). If this is so of such a minor matter as the paschal sacrifice, surely it should be so of the World to Come, which is the holiest matter of all. No uncircumcised individual shall ever, ever eat in it, nor ever, ever, dwell in it."

This disdain for the Gentiles was certainly reciprocated. The Gentiles typically held the Jews in great contempt. Listen to Pilate's conversation with Jesus on the night the latter was tried:

"Pilate went back into the palace and called Jesus. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asked him. Jesus answered, "Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?" Pilate replied, "Do you think I am a Jew? It was your own people and the chief priests who handed you over to me. What have you done?"- John 18:33-35

As others have noted, there is a "dripping sarcasm" in Pilate's voice when he asks, "I surely am not a Jew, am I?"

Another scholar put it this way: "There was a great hatred among the Gentiles for the Jews, a deep disdain, as if they didn't belong even in the framework of humanity."

I think that if we understand this historic division between Jews and Gentiles, we can also understand what a monumental task it would be for Peter to enter a Gentiles' home and share the Good News of the Gospel. I might put it this way: That is what the Holy Spirit is up against when he prods Peter to take the Gospel to Cornelius and his household.

Looking at verse 21, we read, that, hearing the Spirit's direction, "Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" – v. 21

Peter doesn't wait for a household servant to bring the men through the gate and look for him. Instead, he takes the stairs down to the street level and introduces himself.

Note that Peter doesn't say, "I'm the one you are looking for, and I know why you are here." He does know, by the Spirit, that they are looking for him – but he doesn't yet know why. He just knows it has something to do with the vision he just had.

We have some repetition in the next set of verses. It's necessary for Luke to allow this, since the three visitors need to tell Peter why they are there. We, of course, already know. They tell Peter:

"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." – v. 22

This is fascinating. We get some further insights into Cornelius' life as the men explain their errand.

At the outset, the men describe Cornelius as – "The Centurion". Given what they proceed to say about Cornelius we may infer that this "soldier-convert" was well known in Joppa. We might also take into account that this would not be Peter's first hearing of such a man.

In Luke 7:5 there was another centurion who was stationed at Capernaum and had built the synagogue there. When Jesus encountered his faith connected to a dying servant, he told the disciples, he had not found this kind of faith even among the Israelites. Jesus went on to say, “Many will come from east and west and north and south, and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God” (Matthew 8:11).

The next thing they tell Peter is that Cornelius was “a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people.”

Now, I have to tell you that such a description of a Gentile Centurion would be rare. Typically, these were battle-hardened men who were part and parcel of their Roman counterparts. So to have a Centurion described as righteous and God-fearing was meant to appeal to Peter’s own spiritual language.

More than that, notice the next words: “He is respected by all the Jewish people”. This adds to what I said previously. For Cornelius to have such a reputation among “all the Jews” he must have been well known in Joppa.

Caesarea Maritima had a large population of Jews. As some scholars have pointed out, some of the most celebrated Jewish doctors of the day lived there. Although it was a Roman port and garrison, it was one of the most prosperous and populated cities of the empire.

No doubt the description of Cornelius’ acceptance by the Jews was meant to be a further inducement for

Peter to consider going to see the man. Considering how the Jews disdained Gentiles, it was truly a remarkable statement for them to make about Cornelius.

Again, it reminds me of the story of the Centurion's servant in Luke 7. In that case, it was the Jewish elders from the Capernaum synagogue who went to Jesus to ask him to heal the man's servant. In vouching for his character they told Jesus:

“This man really deserves your help. 5 He loves our people and he himself built a synagogue for us.” – Luke 7:4-5

Finally, adding to the strangers' description of Cornelius, they said, “A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” – v.22

To me, this last sentence seals the deal. If an angel spoke to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter, what more proof did the latter need? It dovetails perfectly with the vision Peter has just seen. It would take a very obstinate apostle to refuse such an invite.

Okay, let's round out this section. Now, remember, when Peter first went up to the upper level of Cornelius' home, lunch was being prepared by the servants or Mrs. Tanner. By now, the meal is prepared. Don't gloss over the next words in verse 23: “Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.”

If you keep in mind all that I have said about the first-century attitudes of Jews towards Gentiles, this is remarkable. I have to smile when Luke says that Peter

invited them to come under Simon's roof, and no doubt also invited them to lunch. Simon might have been a tanner – a low-born Jew, but he was still a Jew! And yet, Peter invites these Gentiles to have lunch – and as it turns out – to stay the night.

Jews simply did not have Gentiles under their roofs. It wasn't done. It couldn't be done. It shouldn't be done!

Let me peek ahead and show you what happened after Peter got home from his trip to Joppa. In Acts 11:1-3, we read about the reactions of the "Jerusalem Council" to Peter's trip to Caesarea Marittima:

"The apostles and the other believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 When Peter went to Jerusalem, those who were in favor of circumcising Gentiles criticized him, saying, "You were a guest in the home of uncircumcised Gentiles, and you even ate with them!"

Allowing Cornelius' servants to come into the house was bad enough. The soldier that accompanied them was part of an occupying force. At the least, Peter should have kept him outside and let him fend for himself.

But here we have even further indications that the Holy Spirit's work is finding success in Peter's life. With Simon's permission, Peter invites the men to lunch, and has them stay the night.

In the original Greek text, the word used for "lodge" is special. *Exenesis*, means to entertain someone as a guest. As the early Church father, Chrysostom put it, "He gave them friendly treatment, and made them at home with him" - Chrysostom.

Peter treated the three Gentile visitors as guests. We find the same word in Hebrews 13:2 where the writer reminds us that some, in the Old Testament, had “entertained angels unawares.”

I like how John MacArthur describes those moments:

“[Peter] just rolled out the red carpet for these Gentiles, which must have been something else for them to experience, and God hadn’t even told him to do that. It was too late to travel back to Caesarea at that hour, so they decided to just stay, and Peter just showed the walls had come down. Well after all, he was living in the house of Simon the tanner, one of the most despised trades imaginable.

Peter is definitely making progress towards taking the Gospel into all the world. We will see what happens next time.