



## Session Twenty-One

### The Book of

### Acts, Pt.5

### Acts 9:32-12:25

In this week's readings, the focus shifts back decisively to Peter, first in the lengthy—and extraordinarily important—narrative concerning Peter and Cornelius, then Peter's imprisonment as a consequence of Herod's decision to persecute Christians. Along the way, other narrative threads appear, but Peter remains center-stage. This is, perhaps, as it should be; after chapter 12, Peter effectively disappears from the remainder of Acts.

1) Before Luke introduces Cornelius at the beginning of Acts 10, he narrates two healings involving Peter. Note, as you read, the striking similarities between these narratives and the stories of Jesus' healings in the Gospels. This is not coincidental. Peter's ability to heal others is not due to magic or anything that could pass as first century medical knowledge. Peter can heal because of his close, ongoing communion with the risen Lord. It's also the case that these stories—like those concerning Jesus—are not just about healing. They're also about the promise of the Gospel (healing of the soul as well as the body) and, ultimately, conversion because as a result of the healing, people "turn to" and "believe in" the Lord. Not that we can expect to heal people as Peter did, but what does this suggest about your own discipleship?

2) While Acts does not interweave narratives about Peter and Paul to a significant degree, the way Luke tells about Peter's ministry paves the way for Paul's ministry. Note, for example, that without Peter's vision and subsequent baptism of Cornelius, Paul's entire ministry wouldn't have been possible. Why?

3) Do you see any significance in the fact that Peter, prior to his vision of clean and unclean foods and the baptism of Cornelius, is staying in the house of a tanner?

4) Look at 10:12. Note that not all the animals in Peter's vision were ritually unclean and, therefore, forbidden for an observant Jew like Peter to eat. There were both clean and unclean animals. Why is that important?

5) Look at 10:19-20. The Spirit has assumed a presence such that the Spirit uses a personal pronoun (“I”) for self-reference. And notice how the Spirit is directing what Peter is to do. Here’s evidence of what we’ve said about the book of Acts all along, that post-Pentecost, the events of Acts are driven by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the case can be made that not a step taken by Jesus’ followers isn’t a step prepared by the Holy Spirit. Does this suggest anything about your own discipleship?

6) Beginning at 10:35, Peter provides another retelling of the Gospel, underscoring yet again the absolute centrality of intimate knowledge of Jesus’ story to his followers in the early church. It’s important to keep in mind that while writing certainly existed at that point in history and there were scrolls of what we know as books of the Old Testament, nothing of Jesus’ life and ministry had been written down. It existed only in the hearts and minds of his followers. For all the benefits of books and, later, the internet, we have perhaps paid a price for the fact we no longer have to internalize Jesus’ story to remember it.

7) Read 10:44-48. Note that the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household *prior* to being baptized. Indeed, such coming is the reason Peter decides to baptize them. Why is this important?

8) 11:1-18 introduces us to one of the most critical questions in the book of Acts and, by extension, one of the most critical questions faced in the formative years of Christianity: the place of Gentiles in the body of Christ. The question will not be totally resolved until the so-called Council at Jerusalem which we’ll read about in Acts 15. But a significant step is taken here when Peter’s actions vis-à-vis Cornelius and household are questioned by “the apostles and the believers in Judea” resulting in Peter returning to Jerusalem.

- a. Note that the question posed to Peter isn’t about Baptism but about his decision to have table fellowship with uncircumcised men. Why would that be their concern?
- b. Note, too, that Peter’s recounting of the events in question focuses more on his vision of clean and unclean food than on Cornelius. Why?
- c. The dispute is resolved not by the apostles and believers celebrating that Jews can eat with Gentiles (their original concern) but that God has extended repentance to the Gentiles. Why?

9) Beginning with 11:19, we discover that at the same time Peter was healing and baptizing in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea, another Gentile mission was taking place in what’s known as Syrian Antioch. This mission apparently was among Christians scattered as a result of Stephen’s death. The church at Antioch in particular was successful, so much so that first Barnabas then Paul went there to work and teach among them. Mindful of that, note 11:27-30, which narrates what the church at Antioch does in response to an anticipated famine in Judea. Why is this act on the part of the Antioch so significant?

10) With expansion and success for the early church comes renewed persecution, a reminder, among other things, that the Gospel, rightly pursued, is almost always a threat to someone, especially someone in a position of power and authority.

- a. James (brother of John, not brother of Jesus) is murdered and Peter is arrested, presumably to be put to death, too. Thanks to divine intervention, however, he escapes. Note where Peter goes: “to the house of Mary...where many had gathered and were praying” (12:12). What is the significance of this?
- b. 12:24-25, when read in light of the events narrated in 12:18-23, is important. Why?

11) The story of Acts, taken as whole, is, in many ways, a story of the constant redefining of ever-expanding boundaries. What begins as the purview of 12 men who followed Jesus gradually expands to include others; indeed, eventually, it expands to include all creation. And, at each step, there was resistance. At any point in time, many wanted the boundaries to remain as they were. This narrative of expansion/resistance has continued to the present day, usually in the name of change or fear thereof.

I urge you to think about this very carefully: if you're one who is not comfortable with the boundaries shifting, or shifting only in certain ways and under certain circumstances, *why*? I urge you, too, not to settle for an easy answer like, “Well, people don't like change.” That's true, but such an answer doesn't tell us very much. Press yourself: why do you feel as you do about this?