

## Group Study Outline

### Acts 10:9-48 Theme Sentence

Anyone may become a Christian.

#### Launching Question:

When you think of the least likely people to become Christians, who comes to mind? *God is making the point to Peter that anyone may become a Christian, and to make that point he chooses the least likely person: a thoroughly decent bloke!*

#### READ Acts 10:9-48

What do we know about Cornelius's background from this story?  
What did God tell him through his angel? Why did he need to be told this?

What do we know of Peter's attitude to Gentiles (like Cornelius) from this story?  
How was it that Jews had come to think that non-Jews were 'unclean'?  
Why does the vision of a mixture of clean/unclean animals change his mind?  
Peter saw this vision three times (16): what does that suggest about his attitude?

Peter's realisation is summarised in 28, 34-35. Put it into your own words.  
Why does Peter preach the gospel once he knows Cornelius is 'acceptable' (35)?  
Doesn't the vision of the sheet tell us that God now accepts everyone as 'clean'?  
What does this passage tell us about how someone is 'clean' before God?

#### Re-READ Acts 10:34-43

How is this sermon different from / similar to sermons that Peter has previously preached in Acts? (cf 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-11, 19-20; 5:29-32)  
Why is it important that Peter is heard to be preaching the same message?

Look at the last two verses of the sermon (42-43): why do you think Peter talks about Jesus as Judge before he talks about Jesus as Saviour?  
Is this emphasis something that we generally include in our gospel?

What happens in 44-48? what does this coming of the Holy Spirit show? (cf 11:17)

#### Thinking it through

Why is this passage so important if the gospel is to spread to the end of the earth (as 1:8 commands)?  
Why is Peter's vision the key to world evangelisation?  
Who needs the gospel? *Don't be satisfied with the quick-fire answer 'everyone'!*  
What should be our response to the fact that billions do not yet know Christ?  
What, generally, is our response to that fact? why?  
Why do you think world mission is often just a minority interest in church life?

In what ways do we discriminate in church life?  
In what ways do those kinds of discrimination deny the gospel we proclaim?  
What can we practically do about that?  
Why do we think certain people are the least likely to become Christians?

# Acts 10:9-48



## The story so far ...

The ascending Lord Jesus promised to send his Holy Spirit to equip his church to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (1:8). This sets the scene for what the rest of Acts describes.

The book therefore neatly divides up into four sections:

- the giving of power (roughly, chapters 1-2)
- Jerusalem (3-7);
- Judea and Samaria (8-9);
- the ends of the earth (10 to the end, where the gospel reaches Rome).

And Luke uses a phrase about 'growth' as a summary sentence to mark each section (- look at the last verse[s] in each of the following sections):

- 1:1-2:47 the first Christians
- 3:1-6:7 the first Christian in Jerusalem
- 6:8-9:31 the first *partly* Jewish Christians
- 9:32-12:24 the first *non*-Jewish Christians
- 12:25-16:5 the encounter with the wider non-Christian world
- 16:6-19:20 more acceptance, more resistance

But if the gospel is to go to the end of the earth, then it will require a seismic change in thinking (as Acts 10:9-48 shows) before the early church could recognise that anyone may become a Christian. Peter's vision (and his persuasion as a result of it) is the key to world evangelisation.

[NS]

### Acts 10:9-48 Theme Sentence

Anyone may become a Christian.

## Application

- Peter's vision is the key to **world evangelisation** ... without borders. We'd do well to ask whether we think international mission is as important as God does. When there are so many billions of people (and even people groups) who have not heard the gospel, how can we be complacent?
- If the fundamental divide between Jew and Gentile is healed, then every other discrimination is healed in Christ. **Racial, generational, social, class divisions are abolished too.** It is to our shame that so many of those divisions are perceived as active in this country's Christianity.
- **God wants to save even the least likely person** (- in this case, a thoroughly nice bloke!): who would we think 'the least likely person'?

## Context

This passage is part of a longer section made up of two hugely contrasting stories (each with a pair of principle characters):

- 9:32-11:18 Peter and Cornelius:  
the blessing of God on believing Gentiles (Cornelius & his family)
- 12:1-23 Peter and Herod:  
the judgment of God on unbelieving Israel (Herod & his nation)

Both stories involve a supernatural authentication as Peter & Cornelius both have a vision, and Peter & Herod are both visited by an angel. Both stories include Peter's declaration of the theological point (10:34-35; 12:11).

Between these two stories, Luke tells us about Antioch (11:19-30) which is to be the new (not Jerusalem) centre for the new Jewish-Gentile church's work and ministry, and so the appropriate place for their new name ('Christians' 11:26).

## Commentary

9:32-43 shows Peter at the outer limit of where the gospel has gone so far, and could go (- Joppa is right on the coast!). The question posed is therefore: what next? The answer lies in the vision of the sheet.

10:1-8 introduces us to Cornelius. The story of these verses is related later in the passage (22, 30-33). But the significant detail here (2) is that he is deeply religious, what we might call 'a serious seeker'. Yet he clearly was not saved until a missionary had told him about Jesus, and he responded to the gospel in repentance and faith (cf 11:17-18).

9-16 To understand the background to this vision, it's helpful to go back to the OT. God's intention had always been the blessing of his people for the sake of all peoples (cf Gen 12:2-3); Israel were to be light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3). The way this was to happen was through the distinctiveness of Israel: the Gentiles should look at God's 'set apart' people and see how wonderful it is to have God as your God. This holiness was so critical that God insisted it should be literally woven into the fabric of Israel's culture, even in the clothes they wore and the houses they lived in. Most famously, it affected (and still affects) the food they eat (eg Lev 11:46-47). But these 'boundary markers' had acted as exclusions. The Gentiles had come to be regarded as 'separate ... excluded ... foreigners ... without hope ... without God' (Eph 2:11-12): you can't be more distant from God than that!

The dramatic vision given to Peter (three times [16], and related three times) is the means God 'converts' (!) Peter. He has to change him from the attitude of 11:28a to accept not only Jesus' verdict about 'unclean' food (cf Mark 7:19), but also his verdict about 'unclean' people (11:28b cf Eph 2:14-18). He leads the way in discovering that belief in Jesus is the international way of salvation.

11 There's a lot of 'supernaturalism' in this story (cf 30). The whole point is not that these are everyday occurrences, but God's stunning initiative and attestation of a critical move forwards in gospel growth.

34-35 Peter's realisation is not that people all over the world can come to God in their own particular way through their own particular religion. If that was what he believed, he wouldn't have gone on to preach the gospel to Cornelius. No, it is more of a realisation about God (who shows no partiality) than about whether Cornelius is saved. He says that people of any nationality may now come to God if they come in the right way (43). His understanding was not universalism (ie 'everyone will be saved'), but globalism (ie 'everyone now may be saved').

36-43 This is the first recorded sermon preached to a Gentile. It is substantially the same message that Peter has preached before, for Gentiles must receive the same gospel as Jews. There are some subtle differences: Peter could not say to Cornelius, as he had in Jerusalem on previous occasions, 'you killed Jesus' (2:23; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30), so he says 'they killed him', and Luke shows Peter telling more of a life-story of Jesus (37-39) than was needed on previous occasions. But the gospel outline (they killed him; God raised him; we saw him) remains intact, and the gospel offer (forgiveness from judgement; and the gift of the Holy Spirit) is held out in the same way.

42-43 is a note-worthy conclusion the sermon. The thing to note is that the order of the verses is surprising: we would tend to talk about forgiveness first (with the returning Jesus as a second point). But Peter's gospel always focuses on the appointment of Jesus to the position of supremacy (cf 2:36): God has installed Jesus as universal Judge (even of decent people like Cornelius). But the further truth is that the One who is our Judge came first as our Forgiver (and of course, we wouldn't need a Forgiver if we didn't have a Judge to face).

It may seem obvious ... but note that, in this context of Gentile inclusion, Peter preaches 'good news of peace' (36) - the same gospel as Eph 2:11-22 - about Jesus, his death, resurrection, reign and salvation and how 'the dividing wall of hostility' is broken down 'by the blood of Christ'. There's no other gospel to overcome the barriers by which people feel excluded.

44-48 That God gives his Spirit is the critical climax of the story. Actually, Peter didn't mention the Holy Spirit in his sermon: perhaps, since the gift of the Spirit is God's work and since this man is a Gentile, Peter doesn't presume. But 45b makes it clear that the coming of the Spirit is the visible proof of God's acceptance.

Pentecost is God pouring out his Spirit 'on all flesh' (2:17). But that Jerusalem outpouring could be misunderstood as 'on all Jews'. In 8:14-17, the apostles watch Samaritans receive the same Spirit: delaying their 'Samaritan Pentecost' authenticates their conversion/inclusion as a true work of God. Here, the same thing happens: a 'Gentile Pentecost' (as the Spirit comes and converts speak in tongues) affirms their inclusion in God's great plan. Peter explains this logic explicitly in reporting back to Jerusalem (11:15-18): who was I to stand in God's way?

As always in Acts, the stories are constructed to tell the fulfilment of the advancing plan of the ascended, authoritative Jesus, declared in 1:8.