

The Life & Teachings of Paul #5

Acts 9–10

by: Ronald L. Dart

We've now come to Acts 9:32. At this point Luke shifts gears a little bit and takes us back to Peter. Remember now, one of the points that Luke is trying to establish is the transition that took place between Christianity being just another Jewish sect and it becoming a worldwide religion. The explanation for his reader of how it took place, how it happened that the gospel was able to go to the gentiles. We take it so much for granted today in the 20th century that the gospel as we call it was taken to the whole world. It wasn't quite as evident to those first century Christians. And there was a lot of change that had to take place in the minds of all concerned. The major part of that change took place, not with Paul interestingly enough but with a man named Peter. And so it is that Luke shifts his focus now to Peter who is busy going through Judea, making his way through townships and villages and cities. Preaching the gospel and expanding and expounding upon the ministry of Jesus Christ.

But at this point in time he is still only going to Jews. Verse 32. And it came to pass as Peter passed throughout all quarters, he came down to the Saints which dwelt at Lydda. Lydda, down toward the coast, downhill from Jerusalem quite a little ways. Really not far out of the area that we today would call Tel Aviv. In fact, Laud airport at Tel Aviv I believe is approximately in the location of Lydda. There he found a certain man named Aeneas who had kept his bed for eight years and was sick of the palsy. Peter said to him, Aeneas Jesus Christ makes you whole arise, make your bed. And he arose immediately. And everyone that dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

Now these miracles that were done here and there I guess were some of the best form of advertising that has ever been imagined. It certainly served that purpose. I don't think that was all there was to it as far as what God was doing and granting Peter the power to perform these miracles. He could have performed any number of things other than healing, it was the choice of healing in itself that was interesting and what it said, but that has to be dealt with elsewhere another time. The result here was that as Luke puts it all that dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. So here you've got a majority of the population of two townships that turned to God as the result of a miracle that was performed. And indeed it was a notable one.

Now there was at Joppa, which is just a little further down the coast, on the coast and just a little further south than Lydda. There was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha,

which is by interpretation Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and alms—deeds which she did. It came to pass in those days that she was sick and died. When they had washed the body they laid her in an upper chamber. And because Lydda was close to Joppa and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him desiring that he would not delay and come on down. So Peter arose and went with them, and when he was come they brought him to the upper chamber and all the widows stood by him weeping and showing him the coats and the garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. But Peter put them all forth and kneeled down and prayed and turning to the body he said, Tabitha arise, and she opened her eyes and when she saw Peter she sat up. He gave her his hand, lifted her up, and when he had called the Saints and the widows he presented her alive. And it was known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. It came to pass that he tarried many days in Joppa with a man named Simon who was a tanner by trade.

Now this is interesting in so many different ways. One of the things that people often look for and wonder about is why there are not more miracles in the church. For here are certainly two notable miracles done by Peter. A man named Aeneas who had been sick with the palsy for eight years and was well-known to be a sick man, he was healed. Now we have a well-known and much respected woman named Dorcas who was very generous in giving to the poor and done I guess a lot of handcrafts and gave these to the poor. She died and Peter brings her back to life. Now there aren't very many instances in the Bible where that sort of miracle takes place. I think it's important for us to pause just a moment here and think about this. Throughout all of the Bible how many instances are there of people being raised from the dead? What would you guess? Well as it happens, there is about seven. Now seven times of a person being raised from the dead in 6000 years is not what you call a lot of miracles, is it? It's not something that happens every week, or something that you can expect to see necessarily in your lifetime. And how often in the Bible is there someone healed of the palsy or a cripple who has been crippled for a long time? Well you see, these are recorded here because they are noteworthy miracles and through the months that had proceeded this there hadn't been that much of note for someone to comment on.

The fact is that there was a healing here and a healing there, but they were pretty much far apart. They were in many cases months and some cases years apart in the recording of events in the Bible. But because they are all compressed into these accounts, you and I read them and we have this overwhelming impression of miracle, miracle, miracle. And we look around us today and we don't see much of that going on and we think, boy the holy spirit must not be very active today. But as I said you can't expect to see someone raised from the dead but about once in 1000 years. And you can't expect to see a cripple healed just every week. So we have to keep these things in perspective and realize that God works powerfully in miracles at key points in his ministry, in his plan, in his efforts to reach out to man. He doesn't do these things day in and day out, week in and week out.

Now continuing in chapter 10. Because what Luke has done is bring Peter to a particular point and place in time so that a given change can take place in his life, in his

mind, in his ministry. So that God can communicate with him. In chapter 10 verse 1. There was a certain man in Caesarea named Cornelius. Now Caesarea is on up the coast to the north of Joppa, several miles. And this man is a centurion of a band called the Italian band. A devout man, one that feared God with all his house. Who gave much alms to the people and prayed to God always. He saw in a vision, evidently about the ninth hour of the day. An angel of God coming in to him and saying to him, Cornelius. And he looked at the man and he was afraid and he said, what is the Lord? He said to him, Your prayers, and your alms are come up for a memorial before God.

Now you know how many years, or how long this man had been serving God I could not even begin to imagine. But throughout his life day in day out, year in year out, he had prayed and he had given alms. He was very prone to give to the poor. He was very much encouraged to give to the down and out. To the people who needed help, to the sick, to the infirm, to the unemployed, to the widows, to the fatherless. He was a man who gave a lot of money and things to people in a desire to help them. And he was a man who prayed regularly to God. Now this went on, who knows how long, how many years. With no outward affect.

This angel comes to him. When he finally shows up he said, your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. I don't know if we think about that very much. Jesus made this comment, that if anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to a thirsty man in the name of the Lord, that that would not be forgotten. That that would be credited to his eternal account as it were. I don't think we think that great deal about the fact that the good deeds that we do, the fact that we give money to people who are in need. That we whip out our wallet and roll off some bills and hand them to a man who is out of work, and we do this in the name of Jesus Christ, or because we are Christians, that in the process of doing that a memorial comes up before God on our behalf. That our prayers, our day in day out prayers are a memorial before God. You may think that nothing is going on, you may think that nothing is happening, that there is no special response or special blessing that comes about. It may feel in some ways that you are just going through the motions, but things go on sometimes that are out a sight of the rest of us.

And this man learned that through all those years of his prayers and his alms, they were coming up as a memorial before God. And God, when the time came that the gospel should go to a Gentile, and he wanted to make this break, and he had to teach Peter a lesson which Peter hadn't learned yet. And so Cornelius against the great blessing of being involved in this lesson. So when the angel had told him that his prayers and his alms had come up as a memorial before God, he then said now send men to Joppa and call for one Simon whose surname is Peter. He lodges with Simon a tanner whose house is by the seaside, he that Peter will tell you what to do. Now when the angel which spoke to him left Cornelius immediately called two of his household servants and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually. I gather that one of his soldiers of the Italian band was also a convert. These men doubtless were in the synagogue as well.

When he had declared all these things to them he sent them on their way down to Joppa. And must have waited with considerable expectation. On the morrow as they went on their journey they drew near to the city, and while these men were walking there this whole thing is really interestingly coordinated by God. These men are walking toward the city, Peter at that very moment walks up on top of the house to pray about the sixth hour of the day. Now top of the house was just a place where he could have some privacy and some fresh air, where he could be alone. So about the sixth hour of the day, about noon, while he was waiting on lunch no doubt, Peter goes up on top of the house to pray. And he was hungry, and he would have eaten, and while they were making the food downstairs though, he fell into a trance. He went into a vision. In this vision he saw Heaven opened and a certain vessel descending to him as it had been a great sheet, knit at the four corners and let down to the earth wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth and wild beasts and creeping things and fowls of the air.

There came a voice to him, rise Peter kill and eat. Now this bothered Peter, for one thing he knew, he had to realize he was in vision. And he calls the one speaking to him Lord. So he recognizes the divine authority of what is being said to him. And yet he refuses, he says not so Lord for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. Now it tells us that in this sheet that was let down was every sort of four-footed beasts and wild things and creeping things. In other words, snakes I guess, and every foul bird and clean bird and common bird and unclean or what have you were all there. There were many things in that sheet which the law of God specified that a man should not eat. Now we think about this for a moment, many people have looked back at Jesus' ministry and they thought they had found in things that Jesus said, some statement or another that purged all meats. Or that purified all meats, or that changed the law. In old Testament times for example the Law said that you're not to eat any flesh of any animal that does not have a divided hoof and chew the cud. So an animal with a single hoof, not cloven, you couldn't eat. An animal that did have a divided hoof but didn't chew the cud, you could not eat. These were prohibited for some reason.

Now many people believe that Jesus changed all that. Now frankly if it had been Jesus intent to change all that, it is unthinkable that Peter would not have known that. How in the world could he have been with Jesus Christ for 3 2 years, you know walking up and down the roads of Judea. Going up to Galilee, coming back down to Jerusalem. Camping out at night, sitting around the campfire. Talking about everything under the sun. Hearing every one of Jesus' sermons that he gave during this period of time. If it were Jesus intent to purge meats or purify foods or to declare that all of those laws regulating the dietary habits of Israel, all these laws were abrogated and not in effect, one would think Peter would have known that by this time. And this response, that he said no, no I can't eat these things.

So here is one of the leading apostles, one of the key figures in the development of the religion of Jesus throughout the new Testament. Who all these years after Christ's ascension

still doesn't know that it's all right to eat a pig or a horse or a dog or a cockroach or whatever else it is that a person might think he wants to eat. Peter said, no I don't want to eat this. I've never had anything common or unclean ever past my lips. The voice spoke to him again the second time and said, what God has cleansed that you do not call common. This was done three times and the vessel was received up again into heaven. Now if the account stopped there a person might possibly be justified in saying that well here see God was showing Peter that it's all right to eat pork or horse or dog or seal or whale blubber or whatever else it is that a person may be so inclined to eat.

But notice Peter we're told in verse 17, doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean. Now how could he doubt? How could he have a question about what it meant? I mean here is a sheet let down, here is a heavenly voice that says eat. And he says no I can't eat common or unclean in there. And this didn't happen one time, it happened three times and Peter's response was the same all three times. Now this would be absolutely astonishing if it were true that Jesus had changed this law and it was his intent that a person be able to eat anything at all that struck his fancy of all herbs animals and anything else on the face of the earth. For here is a leading apostle, a converted man, who was with Jesus, who knew the gospel, who doesn't know what that vision means at this point in time.

So while he doubted what it would mean, and the men that were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house and they stood at the gate knocking. And they called and said, is there a Simon Peter lodging here? And while Peter thought on the vision the spirit said to him, behold three men are looking for you arise therefore and get down and go with them doubting nothing, I have sent them. Now why did he need to be told that? Because surely you would think that if he just said somebody wants you, and he went and talked to them, and they said well look Cornelius has sent us to you, he had a vision that you were supposed to come and talk to us, that Peter would just have gone. Well no because you see these men were Gentiles. And Peter at this point and time did not yet understand fully that the gospel was to go to the gentiles. There is the thing that Peter didn't know.

You see he had a problem with a vision that would come along and tell him that the law was abolished or changed in some way. Because he knew what the Law said about eating clean and unclean meats. Peter couldn't accept the idea that's so glibly tossed around by some people that the law was abolished. But God had to show him a thing or two here. He had to explain to him that he was to go with these men and Peter will later tell us in no uncertain terms the lesson that he learned from this sheet being let down from heaven and what it really meant.

So in verse 21 we read, Peter went down with the men which were sent to him from Cornelius. And he said I am the man that you are looking for. Why have you come? And they said, well Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that fears God and has a good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by an holy angel to send for

you into his house and to hear words from you. So he called them in and lodged them, and on the morrow Peter went away with them and certain brethren from Joppa accompanied him. So here's Peter and several Jews who have gone along with him going down to Caesarea to talk to a Gentile. So Cornelius waited for them, and he had called together all of his kinsmen and his near friends. And as Peter was coming in Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. And Peter took him up and said hey stand up I also am a man. Peter was not about to allow that kind of obeisance to be paid to him personally, because he more than any other perhaps was painfully aware of his own humanity.

As he talked with them he went in and he found this large group of people that had gathered together. And he said to them, you know how it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to keep company or to come to one of another nation. Those were his first words. There are a group of Gentiles all gathered in front of him and he's standing in front of them, and of course they did know this, this was well-known to anyone living in this area. That the Jews were just not allowed to have concourse with the gentiles, it's as simple as that. Peter's first words, you know it is unlawful for a man like me, a Jew, to keep company or to even come into the house of a Gentile. But God has showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Isn't that interesting? What was the point of the vision? Was it to change the law? Why of course not. Had it been so Peter would have seen that. Peter would have said oh I see, the reason is the law of God has changed and the point of this vision is that we can all have pork now. We can have bacon and eggs for breakfast. No no. That was not what the vision meant to Peter at all.

What the vision meant to Peter and the whole object of this exercise is that Peter had to learn that he was not allowed to call any man common or unclean. He had to be able to take the gospel to all of them. This was apparently a very difficult lesson for the apostles to learn. Therefore I came to you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for. I asked therefore for what intent you have sent for me? And Cornelius said, four days ago I was fasting until this hour, and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house and behold a man stood before me in bright clothing. And he said Cornelius your prayer is heard, your alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call here Simon whose surname is Peter, he lodges in the house of one Simon a tanner by the seaside. Who, when he comes shall speak to you. Immediately therefore I sent to you and you have well done that you are come. Now therefore we are all present before God to hear all things that are commanded to you of God.

This is one of the great turning points in history. This moment. What an incredible event it must have been. It's enough to make the hair stand up on your body to think about it if you understand the sociology, the history, the way things were in Judea at this time. The whole thrust of the Jewish religion until this time had been restricted to the Jews. It was their religion, it was their private property. They themselves were the chosen people. They were not even allowed to have concourse, to go under the roof of a Gentile, not to sit down and eat with a Gentile. Much less of course take the gospel to them. And now, here is one

of the leading apostles standing in a room surrounded by Gentiles and realizing fully as this man is speaking that God almighty has changed the world.

Then Peter opened his mouth and said, of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. Isn't it true, isn't it true? The only reason why the Jews were ever the chosen people at all was that they were chosen to suffer, chosen to be a witness, chosen to do a work. They weren't chosen just to be special, there's no big deal in being special for being special's sake is there? Obviously if you are chosen by God, if you're special to God, if God singles you out for something it's for a work, it's to accomplish something. It's not just to be a respecter of persons. I sometimes wonder about people you know, when they find some special relationship with God where they think that they are somehow in with God because of a miracle that has taken place in their life. Or some manifestation of God's holy spirit, oh I must be special. Well sure, you're special, everyone is special with God. God is able to have a special feeling for every human being that's ever lived. All of us are precious in his sight, he's concerned about every man.

Well then what does it mean when God gives you some special gift? Well it's given for a reason. What does it mean when God calls you? Well he calls you for a reason. What did it mean when he chose Peter to do this? What did it mean when he gave this vision to Cornelius? Well he had a reason, there was a work to be done. He goes on to say, Peter does, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons but in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted with him. That's a profound statement when I think about that. In every nation, OK, I'm sitting down in Texas and I don't know where you are, let's transfer our thoughts to some fellow over in, what shall we say, Singapore, South China, Indonesia perhaps. Wherever this person happens to be. If this person happens to have a Bible open in front of him and he has come somehow to understand at least a little bit about God and to fear the God of Jacob, and the God of Abraham, and of Isaac. If he's come to fear that God, and if in paging through the Bible he decides, in the fear of God he wants to do right. Whatever he perceives that right to be, however imperfectly he perceives that right. But he wants to do right, and he sees that it's good to give to the poor, and he gives to the poor. And he sees that it's good to not tell lies and so he makes it a point to tell the truth. He sees that it's desirable to honor your father and your mother so he goes out of his way to do that. Is that man accepted with God? Well Peter seems to think so.

He says, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted with him. Now let's understand that that doesn't necessarily mean that the person is going to achieve salvation or that the person is going to be in the first resurrection. It just simply means that his deeds and the way he stands and what he is doing right now is accepted with God as it is. The question of eternal life and salvation is another matter because there is no other name given in heaven and Earth whereby we must be saved than the name of Jesus. A man cannot enter the kingdom of God by any other way except by Jesus. But does that mean a man cannot have any kind of relationship with God at all? This verse would lead me to wonder.

In every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted with him. What does that mean? Well it means simply that if a man takes up some aspect of God's law and he obeys that law, that the blessings that go with that obedience will be there for him. I don't think it means anything complicated at a spiritual level, or an eternal level. But God's law is a living working law. And it has temporal benefits as well as eternal benefits. And it may very well be that a person who takes up the Bible and fears God and obeys the law of God will achieve a certain degree in blessing in this world as a result in having done that. It may mean no more than that. But in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted with him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. That word I say you know, which was published throughout all Judea and began from Galilee after the preaching which John preached. How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy spirit and with power. Who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all the things that he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem whom they slew and hanged on a tree.

Now I doubt seriously if we have the totality of Peter's message here, I expect this is an outline of key points that Peter was making. But Peter is telling them look, here are the things that Jesus did, we who are standing here talking to you are witnesses of it, we saw these things happen. And it was important that Peter not be there alone I think, that other men had come with him for it was important that the witness be there. And there would have to be two or three witnesses for a matter to be established. This is probably why also when Paul went out, he went out with Barnabas so that there were two witnesses not just one, that Jesus was alive after the resurrection. They slew Jesus, he tells them verse 40, him God has raised up the third day and showed him openly not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before of God. Chosen specifically by God before hand, even to us who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. And this is one of the most critical aspects of Peter's witness to these people. Jesus was alive and we even ate and drank with him after his resurrection. He commanded us to preach to the people, to testify that it is he who was ordained of God to be the judge of the quick and of the dead. To him give all the prophets witness that through his name whosoever believes in him should receive remission of sins.

It's interesting to think about this little session here with Peter, and Cornelius, and it tells us some interesting things when we think about it. For one thing Christianity had been in existence for quite some time. And here was a man, not that many miles from Jerusalem who had a relationship with God, who gave, and gave alms, whose prayers were heard by God, whose alms came up as a memorial before God, who was not a Christian. Now I think that's important for us to realize that it was possible to have a relationship with God at that time without being a Christian. Now to be sure, God because of his caring about this man and his involvement with him, did not leave him indefinitely in that state of mind. But God does not look at time like you and I do, a day is as 1000 years, 1000 years is as a day. You and I would want to get somebody down there to Cornelius today, we wouldn't want to do it five years from now, or three years or even six months from now. If we knew this man

believed in God we'd have to send somebody, let's get down there to him and let's help him understand, and let's make a Christian out of him right now.

God did that, but he did it when he was ready. And when the time was right, and when Cornelius was ready, and when Peter was ready, and when a whole bunch of things came together at one time. But it is interesting isn't it to realize that here was a man who had a relationship with God but who was not a Christian. Now the rewards of being a Christian were not his either, to be sure. But there were some rewards surely for having that relationship with God. It's something that might merit further study.

Well anyway here stands Peter speaking to all of these people, and while he was speaking these words before he even finished his message, he hadn't concluded or made an altar call or anything of the sort, while he was talking the holy spirit fell on them that heard the word with overt manifestations. And this overt manifestation of the spirit was important for without it Peter might have been uncertain. And they of the circumcision, that is the Jews, who were with Peter, those of the circumcision who believed were astonished as many as came with Peter because on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the holy spirit. Do you see why the outward manifestation was important? It was important not only that Peter know, but that the witnesses there know that the Gentiles could receive the holy spirit in an uncircumcised state, which these people were. And so it is that they saw it, and they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then answered Peter, can any man forbid water that these should not be baptized? You see that statement is significant because, had this not happened, had Peter given his sermon, concluded it, and said now how many of you want to be baptized. Someone among him might have said, now wait a minute these people are Gentiles you can't baptize Gentiles. They'll have to be circumcised, they will have to come into the community of Israel in order to be baptized.

But Peter said, which of you is going to forbid water that these should not be baptized? They've already received the holy spirit just like we have. Now normally you baptize and then a person receives the holy spirit. This is one rare exception to that and it had to happen. For if God had not given these Gentiles the holy spirit, Peter or at least the others would have refused to baptize them. Peter said we have to go ahead, so he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. So they prayed him to tarry certain days and doubtless he did. To stay with them, to teach them, to preach to them, to fill them in for there were no scriptures, he couldn't leave them a gospel of Luke or a gospel of John or anything like that to study. So Peter stayed with them and he preached and he taught and he brought all these people along who had now come to believe in Jesus Christ.

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