

Chapter 25: Removing Barriers to the Gospel

Acts 10:1–33

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave his apostles clear marching orders. Their mission was to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). So far, we have seen the expansion of the gospel to Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and we have seen at least one significant encounter with a Gentile who lives at the end of the earth. Now is the time, then, when the gospel will begin to move to the ends of the earth in the Gentile mission. Here, the Lord removes barriers to the spread of the gospel by drawing together a Gentile named Cornelius and the Apostle Peter. As we study this story, the Lord challenges us also to *follow the Spirit beyond barriers to the gospel*.

Barriers to Hearing the Gospel (Acts 10:1–8)

In the previous passage, we saw the capstone of Peter’s ministry to a Jewish population. That ministry had begun on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter had preached to the Jews gathered for the festival about Jesus’ ascension into heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church (Acts 2). After that, Peter performed miracles of healing (Acts 3; 5:12–16), suffered at the hands of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4; 5:17–42), pronounced judgment against Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), and oversaw the extension of the Holy Spirit into Samaria (Acts 8:14–25). Ultimately, the Book of Acts will emphasize the uniqueness of *Paul’s* ministry to bring the gospel to the far-flung Gentiles; however, it is essential that Peter be the one to lead the church into this first step of evangelizing the Gentiles.¹ We quoted Bock’s important observation in the previous passage regarding how all of this work prepares us for the present story we are going to read: “God uses an authenticated, trustworthy minister to take the gospel to the Gentiles, an action that will prove to be controversial.”² Indeed, Schnabel rightly observes that the point of this story is less about a mere conversion, and more about the great scandal that a Gentile might be accepted into the church directly, through faith alone.³ Everything we have read about Peter up to now prepares us for the bold steps he will take in this passage.

Before we get to Peter, however, Luke acquaints us with a man in Caesarea “named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (vv. 1–2). Caesarea was a predominantly Gentile area that will extend the range of the apostolic ministry farther than it has gone up to this point in Acts.⁴ Regarding Cornelius, Luke tells us that he is a “devout man who feared God with all his household” (v. 2a). To provide

¹ “What Peter did in the case of Cornelius was a preparation for the entire work of Paul, who was waiting in Tarsus during these years.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 393.)

² Bock, *Acts*, 379.

³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 483.

⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 214.

evidence for this assertion, Luke adds the fact that Cornelius “gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (v. 2b). There is some debate about the exact status of a “God-fearer”; however, there are two implications of this statement upon which all agree. First, the fact that this man *fears God* tells us that he has come to believe in the God of the Jews, as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament.⁵ Second, despite his faith in God, this man has not gone so far with his faith as to be circumcised, which would have been required for full inclusion in the life of the Israelite community.⁶

Thus, as a God-fearer, Cornelius was a man who stood just outside the community of Israel. He remained a Gentile, and an officer in the Roman army at that. Although we will later read conversion stories of outright pagans coming to faith in Jesus Christ by hearing the gospel preached to them, this man has already entered into a relationship with God characterized by faith, although his status as a Gentile precludes him from entering fully into membership in the people of God. As a God-fearer, then, he is “a bridge figure, ‘standing at the boundary between Judaism and paganism, and living in a very Hellenized city full of Gentiles, yet in the Holy Land.’”⁷ We should perhaps recall that Jesus encountered another centurion who prompted Jesus to say, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:10b–11a). As Bruce observes about Jesus’ statement, “These words now begin to find their fulfilment in another centurion.”⁸

Yet, in spite of this man’s faith, we should not underestimate the barrier that separated him from full participation in the kingdom. Lenski captures this dilemma well: “The great question which the Lord compelled Peter and the church to face in the person of Cornelius was whether the way into the Christian Church was only through Judaism and the synagogue or also direct from Gentilism and paganism by faith and baptism alone.”⁹ In other words, the church faced a significant theological concern about whether someone must *first* become Jewish in order to *second* become a Christian. Was Judaism the necessary, foundational *preparation* for salvation through faith in Christ? Or, was Judaism the only *way* by which Gentiles could come to salvation in Christ? The church will wrestle with this question through the rest of the Book of Acts, but this passage marks the first part of the answer.

As many have observed, it is essential to see the work of God in orchestrating the spread of the gospel into the realm of the Gentiles. To begin, an “angel of God” appears in a vision to Cornelius (v. 3). Although Cornelius “stared at him in terror,” he asks, “What is it, Lord?” (v. 4a). The word “lord” here may mean nothing more than “sir,” or it may suggest that this “angel of the Lord” is in fact the Lord Jesus Christ himself, as the phrase often suggests in its Old Testament usage. In context, however, it is more likely that this is an angel rather than the Lord Jesus himself. The angel then responds with good news for Cornelius: “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (v. 4b). This does not in the least suggest that Cornelius has earned something from God by his works, as though his works were the *cause* of the Lord’s favor to him. Quite the opposite—the fact that the Lord accepted his prayers and alms show that they arise from a heart that is rightly related to God by faith.¹⁰ These good works, then, are not the *roots* (i.e., the grounds) of his

⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 215–16.

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 386.

⁷ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 323–24, citing Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 340n46.

⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 215.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 395.

¹⁰ “Wherefore it is faith alone which maketh them acceptable. Thus did Cornelius obtain more perfect knowledge of Christ by his prayers and alms, but in that he had God to be favorable and merciful to his prayers and alms, that did depend upon faith.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:412.)

salvation, but the *fruits* (i.e., what his faith produces).¹¹

In view of Cornelius's favor with God, the angel instructs Cornelius to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter, who is lodging with Simon the tanner (vv. 5–6). Immediately after the angel departs, Luke tells us that Cornelius called three trusted men, informed them what had happened, and sent them on the way to Joppa (vv. 7–8). Importantly, Cornelius does not know what he should expect from this divine appointment, yet he obeys without hesitation. Again, we see in his actions the fruitfulness that his faith has produced in his life.

Barriers to Going with the Gospel (Acts 10:9–23)

While the men were on their way—and, indeed, quite close to Joppa (“approaching the city”)—Luke tells us that Peter had gone “up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray” (v. 9). Lenski observes a parallel with the story of Saul's conversion: “As the Lord prepared Ananias for Saul and Saul for Ananias (9:10–12), so, after preparing Cornelius, he now prepares Peter.”¹² At this point (“the sixth hour”, or noon; v. 9), Peter “became hungry and wanted something to eat” (v. 10a). The detail of Peter's hunger is important since, before those in the house could finish preparing something for Peter to eat, Peter “fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat’” (vv. 10b–13). Thus, “Peter is then challenged to satisfy his hunger with any one of these creatures—clean or unclean in terms of the Mosaic law.”¹³

Indeed, by telling us that this sheet contained “all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (v. 12), Luke echoes “the threefold division of the animal world as found in the Noah account of Gen 6:20 and the creation account of Gen 1:30.”¹⁴ This is something far more significant than providing food for Peter faster than those working on his behalf downstairs. Rather, the language that “the heavens opened” “points to a disclosure, recalling what was said at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21–22; Acts 7:56).”¹⁵ Immediately, Peter recognizes a problem with this, replying, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (v. 14). There is perhaps an echo in this story of the temptation narrative of Jesus, where our Lord also became “hungry,” albeit by different Greek words (lit, “wanted to taste” [ἤθελεν γεύσασθαι; *ēthelen geusasthai*] v. 10; cf. ἐπείνασεν [*epeinasen*] in Luke 4:2). In the midst of Jesus' hunger, then, the devil tempted him with illegitimate food: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (Luke 4:3). Although Jesus only faced that particular temptation once, the devil tempted Jesus three times before departing him, just as Peter see the vision three times before “the thing was taken up at once to heaven” (v. 16). As the first sin of Adam and Eve had involved eating illegitimate food, and the first temptation that Jesus defeated involved the invitation to eat illegitimate food, we should probably acknowledge the goodness of Peter's hesitation to eat this food that had been ceremonially unclean. Even in the wider issue of authenticating the legitimacy of what Peter does here, his hesitancy is an important part of demonstrating that he did nothing in rash, foolish, haste. His words, then, echo

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 397.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 400.

¹³ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 329.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 254n81.

¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 388.

those of the prophet Ezekiel when the Lord told him to eat unclean food: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I have never defiled myself. From my youth up till now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has stained meat come into my mouth” (Ezek. 4:14).¹⁶ Yet, we should also remember how Peter had protested from a similar misunderstanding when he tried to refuse to allow Jesus to wash his feet (John 13:8).¹⁷

So, although Peter is right to some extent to be cautious about what he eats, the Lord has given him this test in order to show that the ceremonial law that functioned as a barrier to eating such foods no longer exists: “What God has made clean, do not call common” (v. 15). The abrogation of the ceremonial law is important in itself, but the wider implications of this change are far more important. As Polhill reminds us, the function of the ceremonial was first and foremost to separate Israel “from the rest of the nations”:

[24] But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. [25] You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. [26] You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. (Lev. 20:24–26)

These food laws were not mere virtue signaling, but they represented a deep divide between Israel and the Gentiles: “It is simply not possible to fully accept someone with whom you are unwilling to share in the intimacy of table fellowship.”¹⁸

So, removing the barriers of ceremonial food laws signaled more than the fact that Peter could now eat bacon to satisfy his hunger. By this sign, God signaled that the barriers keeping his people separated from the Gentiles had fallen, so that Gentiles too may come into the church alongside Jews. As Calvin writes, “God doth take away by this voice the law concerning the choice of beasts, that he may also teach that he rejecteth no people, (Romans 15:16.)”¹⁹ Jesus himself had hinted that he had come to abolish these ceremonial distinctions (Mark 7:19);²⁰ however, the apostle Peter will not understand the fact of this change or its wider implications until Cornelius’s messengers come to take him to Caesarea. Ultimately, the question Peter must face is less about the laws themselves and about the prerogative of God himself to establish *and to abolish* his own laws.²¹ Although God established his moral law to be timeless and perpetual, the ceremonial laws had been given for a reason and for a season to point forward to the coming of Christ. Now that Christ has come and accomplished all that the ceremonial law anticipated, there is no further need for the ceremonial laws. Indeed, those laws

¹⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 218.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 403.

¹⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 254–56.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:421.

²⁰ “It is to Peter, probably, that we owe the remark appended to the Gospel narrative of Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees on this subject: ‘This he said, making all meats clean’ (Mark 7:19b).” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 219.)

²¹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 330.

must be abolished in order for the next phase of God’s redemptive work to begin.

Although we say that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” in this case Peter was “inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean” (v. 17a). To begin to unlock the meaning of the vision, the Spirit provides Peter with words of explanation:²² “Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them” (vv. 19a–20). Just as Cornelius had promptly responded to the instructions given to him about sending for Peter, so Peter promptly responds to the Spirit’s instructions about going with the men Cornelius had sent (vv. 21–23). It is unclear whether Peter yet understands the full scope of the vision, or whether the Lord uses the journey to Caesarea to give Peter greater clarity about the vision’s meaning.

Barriers to the Gospel Removed (Acts 10:24–33)

As Peter arrives in Caesarea, we discover that Cornelius had gone beyond the bare commandment of the Lord—in a good way. Although the angel had said nothing about bringing others to hear what Peter had to say, we know that Cornelius “feared God *with all his household*” (v. 2). It should not surprise us, then, that “Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends” (v. 24). Lenski observes, “The congregation is assembled and is waiting eagerly for the preacher. One cannot but admire this Roman officer. He is the leader of this flock; many of them owed their faith to him and to his influence. Only one man is needed to start a congregation if he is at all the man he ought to be.”²³ Yet, Cornelius expresses his eagerness to hear the message from Peter wrongly: “When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him” (v. 25). The great apostle Peter corrects him quickly by reminding him that he also is only a man (v. 26). To Christ alone belongs our worship.

As Peter makes his way into Cornelius’s home (“he went in”; v. 27a), he crosses an important boundary. When Peter sees the “many persons gathered” (v. 27b), he explains to them the significance of his actions, lest they miss it: “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me” (vv. 28–29). Certainly Peter must expect what Cornelius tells him in vv. 30–33, especially since the men he had traveled with had been related the details of what had happened (“having related everything to them”; v. 8). Nevertheless, by this question, Peter asks for confirmation to preach the gospel to them, as he will in the following passage.

To conclude, Lenski makes two observations: one about God, and one about the people assembled. First, Lenski observes from the words of both Peter and Cornelius the emphasis on what *God* had done to bring them together that day: “God himself was here opening the door of his church to the entire Gentile world wholly apart from Judaism and the synagogue.”²⁴ Second, Lenski marvels at the readied faith of the people assembled, as expressed by Cornelius’s invitation: “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (v. 33). Lenski writes, “This is, indeed, a model congregation, model in its attitude toward

²² “The words of the Spirit are actually stated in this case. Peter is not left to draw timid conclusions from the vision; the matter is so important in every way that the Spirit himself proceeds to show Peter the full bearing of the vision.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 406.)

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 410.

²⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 415.

God, toward his Word, and toward his minister. Here there is true willingness to receive, believe, and obey.”²⁵ Here we see a two-sided willingness to follow God’s lead in crossing barriers that God has removed. Where is God removing barriers in your life that might have kept you from hearing the gospel or sharing the gospel with others?

Discussion Questions

1. What barriers had kept Cornelius from fully seeking the Lord? In spite of those barriers, what do we know about his faith? How has his faith produced the fruit of good works? How does the Lord prompt Cornelius to reach across a barrier in order to hear the gospel? What barriers keep you from wholehearted pursuit of the Lord? How eager have you been to follow the Holy Spirit beyond those barriers? What does that say about the condition of your faith?
2. What barriers had kept Peter from preaching the gospel among the Gentiles up to this point? How legitimate were those barriers? Why had God established those barriers for the nation of Israel? Why does removing the barrier of food laws remove the barrier for Peter to go to the Gentiles? What kind of barriers keep you from sharing the gospel? How eager have you been to follow the Holy Spirit beyond those barriers? What does that say about the condition of your faith?
3. How eager is Cornelius to hear the gospel that Peter will preach? How do we see his eagerness in the many people whom he gathers for Peter’s arrival? Why does Peter make such a point about the fact that Jews were not supposed to visit Gentiles (vv. 28–29)? How do we see the Holy Spirit at work to remove the barriers that have kept Gentiles like Cornelius from hearing the gospel preached by the apostles of Jesus?
4. What barriers keep you from seeking the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength this morning? Are you burned out with pain? Are you controlled by fear and anxiety? Do confusion and doubt trouble your soul? Are you caught in the snare of sin and temptation? What has Jesus done to remove those barriers between you and God? What kind of barriers keep you from sharing the gospel? What does the Holy Spirit do to remove barriers from sharing the gospel?

²⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 417.