

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Acts 9:32—12:25

Opening Thought

1) Someone has observed that in North America Sunday morning seems to be the most segregated period of the whole week. Do you think this is an accurate observation? If so, what are the reasons for this reluctance or failure of the church to transcend racial and cultural boundaries?

Background of the Passage

After describing Saul's astounding conversion, Luke turned again to the ministry of Peter. In the first nine chapters, the convicting and regenerating work of God's Spirit has been mostly confined to the Jews. Beginning in chapter 10, Luke describes the Spirit's sovereign activity in, of all people, a Gentile army officer stationed on the Mediterranean coast. This is a watershed moment in the history of the church. The one true God—the God of the Hebrews—is about to unveil his eternal plan, hidden through the ages: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6).

To confirm the Gentiles' acceptance by God and their full inclusion in His kingdom as heirs of grace, Luke records these new converts' experience of the Holy Spirit. Exactly as happened with the Jewish believers at Pentecost (chapter 2), these new Gentile converts began speaking in unlearned foreign languages. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter from Joppa (10:23, 45) were amazed. But there was no mistaking what they had just witnessed (verse 46).

To show that Peter's evangelistic encounter with the Gentile Cornelius was not a fluke, Luke mentioned the widespread outreach that had begun taking place in Antioch. This effort to preach to non-Jews by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene had both the power and blessing of God on it, so that “a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (verse 21).

Unable to stop the masses from embracing this new faith, the Jews launched a direct attack upon the leaders of the Christians. No more mere threats and warnings (see 4:18–21; 5:40)—this time, Herod had James executed and Peter arrested. Though from a human perspective the situation appeared terribly grim, from a heavenly perspective this was just another occasion to display the infinite power of God— “the kings of the earth ... and the rulers take counsel together, ... He who sits in the heavens shall laugh. The LORD shall hold them in derision” (Psalm 2:2, 4).

Contrast Herod's gruesome end (“eaten by worms”—verse 23) with the grand advance of the good news.

Bible Passage

Read 9:32—12:25, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

Acts 9:32—12:25

- ³² Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda.
- ³³ There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed.
- ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately.
- ³⁵ So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.
- ³⁶ At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.
- ³⁷ But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.
- ³⁸ And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them.
- ³⁹ Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.
- ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all out, and knelt 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.
- ⁴¹ Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive.
- ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord.
- ⁴³ So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.
- ¹ There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment,
- ² a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.
- ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"
- ⁴ And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.
- ⁵ "Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.
- ⁶ "He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."
- ⁷ And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually.
- ⁸ So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.
- ⁹ The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour.
- ¹⁰ Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance
- ¹¹ and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth.
- ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.
- ¹³ And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."
- ¹⁴ But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."
- ¹⁵ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."
- ¹⁶ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.
- ¹⁷ Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.
- ¹⁸ And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.

19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you.
20 “Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”
21 Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, “Yes, I am he whom
you seek. For what reason have you come?”
22 And they said, “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among
all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear
words from you.”
23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren
from Joppa accompanied him.
24 And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together
his relatives and close friends.
25 As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.
26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.”
27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.
28 Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of
another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.
29 “Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for
me?”
30 So 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,
31 “and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.
32 ‘Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon,
a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.’
33 “So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before
God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”
34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.
35 “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.
36 “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of
all-
37 “that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the
baptism which John preached:
38 “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and
healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.
39 “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they
killed by hanging on a tree.
40 “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,
41 “not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after
He arose from the dead.
42 “And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be
Judge of the living and the dead.
43 “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of
sins.”
44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.
45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift
of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.
46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered,
47 “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we
have?”
48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.
11:1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of
God.

2 *And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him,*
3 *saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"*
4 *But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying:*
5 *"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet,*
6 *let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me.*
7 *"When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping*
8 *things, and birds of the air.*
9 *"And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.'*
10 *"But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'*
11 *"But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'*
12 *"Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.*
13 *"At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from*
14 *Caesarea.*
15 *"Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me,*
16 *and we entered the man's house.*
17 *"And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and*
18 *call for Simon whose surname is Peter,*
19 *'who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.'*
20 *"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.*
21 *"Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be*
22 *baptized with the Holy Spirit.'*
23 *"If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who*
24 *was I that I could withstand God?"*
25 *When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also*
26 *granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."*
27 *Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia,*
28 *Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.*
29 *But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the*
30 *Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.*
31 *And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*
32 *Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as*
33 *far as Antioch.*
34 *When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of*
35 *heart they should continue with the Lord.*
36 *For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the*
37 *Lord.*
38 *Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.*
39 *And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with*
40 *the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*
41 *And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.*
42 *Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great*
43 *famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.*
44 *Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.*
45 *This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*
46 *Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.*
47 *Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.*
48 *And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the*
49 *Days of Unleavened Bread.*
50 *So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him,*
51 *intending to bring him before the people after Passover.*
52 *Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*

6 *And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.*
7 *Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands.*
8 *Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me."*
9 *So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.*
10 *When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.*
11 *And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."*
12 *So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.*
13 *And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer.*
14 *When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.*
15 *But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."*
16 *Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.*
17 *But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.*
18 *Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter.*
19 *But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.*
20 *Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country.*
21 *So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.*
22 *And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"*
23 *Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.*
24 *But the word of God grew and multiplied.*
25 *And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.*

certain man (v. 33)—Aeneas was likely an unbeliever (see the phrase "certain disciple" in verse 36).

tunics ... garments (v. 39) —close fitting undergarments and long outer robes

Simon, a tanner (v. 43)—Peter breaks down a cultural barrier by staying with a man whose job was to tan the hides of dead animals; such an occupation was considered unclean to the Jews and no doubt this Simon was shunned by the members of the local synagogue.

Italian regiment (10:1)—or "Italian cohort" (a legion was comprised of ten cohorts of six hundred men each)

feared God (v. 2)—a technical term to describe a Gentile who had abandoned his or her pagan religion and was, without becoming a full-fledged Jewish proselyte, attempting to worship the true God Yahweh

memorial (v. 4)—a remembrance; Cornelius's prayers, devotion, faith, and goodness were like a fragrant offering rising up to God

housetop to pray (v. 9)—The flat roofs of Jewish homes lent themselves to all kinds of worship.

all kinds of four-footed animals (v. 12)—both clean and unclean animals, according to Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws

kill and eat (v. 13)—The New Covenant effectively ended the Old Testament dietary restrictions; God declared all animals clean, thus making possible a church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

invited them in (v. 23)—Self respecting Jews did not invite Gentiles into their homes, much less soldiers of the hated Roman army.

I myself am also a man(v. 26)—a reminder that only God deserves worship

unlawful (v. 28)—literally, “breaking a taboo”; his comments reveal his acceptance of Gentiles, a turnabout for one who had followed Jewish customs all his life

accepted (v. 35)—The Greek word means “marked by a favorable manifestation of the divine pleasure.”

believes in Him (v. 43)—Faith in Christ alone is the only means of salvation.

ate with them! (11:3)—The Jewish believers were outraged that Peter had committed such a breach of Jewish tradition.

your household (v. 14)—not a sweeping inclusion of infants, but a reference to all who could comprehend the gospel and believe

at the beginning (v. 15)—God confirmed the reality of Gentile salvation with the same phenomenon that occurred at Pentecost.

God has also granted the Gentiles repentance to life(v. 18)—one of the most shocking admissions in Jewish history, but an event prophesied in the Old Testament

hand of the Lord (v. 21)—a reference to God’s obvious power, either in judgment or in blessing; here it refers to blessing

Christian (v. 26)—initially a term of derision, meaning “of the party of Christ”

prophets (v. 27)—preachers of the New Testament

a great famine (v. 28)—Secular historians confirm this event as having happened in A.D. 45–46

elders (v. 30)—pastors-overseers of the churches; these eventually occupied the leading role in the churches when the foundational apostles and prophets passed from the scene

Herod the king (12:1)—Herod Agrippa, son of Herod the Great, ruled from A.D. 37–44; his persecution of believers was an attempt to curry favor with the Jews.

James (v. 2)—the first of the apostles to be martyred

four squads (v. 4)—Each squad had four soldiers; at all times two guards were chained to Peter while the other two stood watch outside the cell.

John ... Mark (v. 12)—the cousin of Barnabas and an acquaintance of Peter; he later became an associate of Paul

his angel (v. 15)—According to Jewish custom, each person had a guardian angel who could take on that person’s form and appearance.

James (v. 17)—This is the brother of the Lord, who, by this time, was leading the church at Jerusalem.

he departed (v. 17)—Except for a brief appearance in chapter 15, Peter now fades from the scene, and the rest of Acts focuses on the ministry of Paul.

put to death (v. 19)—A guard who allowed a prisoner to escape had to suffer the same penalty that awaited the prisoner.

arrayed in royal apparel(v. 21)—According to Josephus, Herod was wearing a garment made of silver.

did not give glory to God(v. 23)—the crime for which God executed the Jewish king

eaten by worms (v. 23)— Josephus records that Herod suffered terribly for five days before his death.

Understanding the Text

2) What are some of the highlights of Peter’s ministry cited by Luke? Why were these events singled out and recorded?

3) What insights into Peter’s character are found in chapters 9–12?

4) What is so significant about the comment at the end of 9:43?

5) How did God sovereignly prepare Cornelius for what was to follow? What did God do to prepare Peter for the momentous event of Gentile inclusion into the church?

Cross Reference

Read Ephesians 2:11–22

Exploring the Meaning

6) This passage, written by Paul under inspiration of God’s Spirit, gives a theological explanation of the historical events recorded in chapters 10 and 11. What is the gist of Paul’s argument? What is he saying?

7) What truth was Peter beginning to grasp when he remarked that God shows no partiality (10:34)?

(verses to consider: Deuteronomy 10:17; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Job 34:19; Romans 2:11; 3:29–30; James 2:1)

8) What evidence or lines of argument did Peter use to calm his Jewish brothers who were alarmed and outraged by the influx of Gentiles into the church (11:1–18)?

Summing Up ...

“We are quick to exclude from our group those we deem undesirable—those who fail to flatter us, support our opinions, reinforce our prejudices, boost our pride, or feed our egos, or whose style of life is significantly different. The world in general expresses its intolerance and bigotry in conflicts at every level, from silent

prejudice to outright war.

“Even the church is not immune to this tendency. Those of another culture, skin color, social status, educational group, or income level often find themselves ... unwelcome in the church. ... Such intolerant exclusivism grieves the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose purpose and prayer was that believers ‘may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me’ (John 17:21).” —*John MacArthur*

Reflecting on the Text

9) Why did Luke include the events of chapter 12 in his record of the church? What lessons can be found in Herod’s persecution of church leaders and his subsequent death?

10) How is God leading you to cross racial or cultural barriers with the love of Christ? What are some specific actions you can take?

11) This section mentions prayer quite a bit. In these chapters we see the extraordinary things that happen when the children of God call out in faith to their Heavenly Father. What are your prayer habits? On a scale of 1–10 (with 1 being “on life support” and 10 representing “I’m in communion with God all day every day”) how would you rate the health of your prayer life?

12) What needs to change—specifically? immediately?
