

LESSON 5

PREPARATION FOR EXPANSION AMONG THE GENTILES

ACTS 9:1–11:18

Introduction

The Samaritans were a mixture of Jew and Gentile. After Philip preached to them and many were converted, the Church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to investigate this new development. The Church could not deny God's acceptance of the Samaritans after it became obvious that they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Spirit worked miracles through Philip among the Samaritans gave evidence of God's plan to include the Samaritans.

It is interesting that God chose the one who reacted most strongly to the inclusion of the Gentiles to be the disciple through whom the Gentiles heard the Gospel. The conversion of Saul leaves no doubt concerning the power of The Gospel to change drastically sinful lives. His conversion marks a significant turning point in the history of the early Church. He had been the most ardent opponent of the new movement and had attempted to destroy it. Peter and the other Apostles were satisfied to limit the movement to the Jews.

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9:1-18

Luke introduces the new trend in the development of the early Church by describing Saul's hostility and determination to destroy the new Church. Saul was extremely zealous for the traditions of the Fathers. He approached the High Priest and secured documents which permitted him to extradite Jews from the synagogue of Damascus. Saul was not content to suppress Christianity only in Jerusalem. He pursued the fleeing Christians to the city where they had sought refuge. Perhaps they had fled to the area of Damascus because of the large Jewish population there. It appears that the High Priest had authority to issue extradition documents for those who had offended in matters of the Jewish religion. Saul intended to return the Christians to Jerusalem for trial and possibly for punishment by death.

It is interesting to note that the Christians continued to relate to the synagogue. A distinction, however, was beginning to be made between them and non-Christian Jews. They were beginning to be identified as those "belonging to the way" (v. 3-NASB) because of their emphasis on the expression, "the way of the Lord" (Isa. 40:3). On the other hand, the expression may have emphasized their manner of life.

It is impossible to explain Saul's experience on the road to Damascus in terms of natural events. The experience involved the senses of sight and hearing. A light suddenly flashed from heaven, and Saul fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Some have attempted to give a psychological explanation to the experience. The change which came about in the life of Saul can be explained only as the result of a supernatural encounter. The question of the Lord to Saul indicates that He was identified with His followers who were being persecuted.

Stephen's witness of Jesus and his testimony in death had helped prepare Saul for his conversion experience. Since Saul was a student of the Old Testament, he was aware that the Hellenistic Jewish Christians could be right about the inclusion of the Gen-

Saul's conversion marks a turning point in the early Church. The Gospel was no longer limited to the _____.

(Jews)

Why was Paul on his way to Damascus? _____

(To extradite the Christians and to return them to Jerusalem for trial)

Christian Jews came to be identified as those " _____ "

(belonging to the way)

tiles in the Kingdom. He attempted to smother his doubts with additional zeal.

Saul is an example of those who attempt to gain success through their own efforts and zeal. His position on the ground before the resurrected Jesus symbolizes spiritually his fall from pride to humility. Instead of devising plans for accomplishing his own aims for destroying the Christian movement, he was instructed by the Lord through His servants.

The men who travelled with Paul heard a noise, but they saw no one. Luke's statement in Acts 9:7 indicates that they heard a noise but did not understand the words. Acts 22:9 seems to make the contradictory statement that they did not hear the voice; however, the Greek structure seems to indicate that "they did not hear with understanding."

Physical events often are used symbolically to communicate spiritual truths. When Saul arose from the ground, he could see nothing. Perhaps his physical blindness symbolized his spiritual blindness. The bright light from heaven may have symbolized the dawning of spiritual truth. Saul was led into Damascus to await further developments in his new spiritual experience. He continued without sight for three days, eating and drinking nothing. This period gave him three days of continuous concentration on his traumatic experience. The encounter with Jesus meant that his entire life would have to be reversed. Part of his zeal was motivated probably by a desire to excel as an individual. He had strongly opposed and denounced Christians; now he must admit that he had been wrong and they were right. He had rebelled against the inclusion of Gentiles in the Kingdom of God; now he was to become the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Luke includes the reaction of Ananias who emphasized the terror the name Saul brought to Christians. The Lord revealed to Ananias in a vision that he should go to the house of Judas and lay hands on Saul in order that he would regain his sight. Even though Saul was praying, Ananias knew that Saul had come with documents from the High Priest to extradite those who called upon the name of Christ. Only after the Lord revealed to Ananias that Saul was a chosen vessel to proclaim Christ before the Gentiles was he willing to go. The one who had caused Christians to suffer would now suffer for Christ.

Ananias found the house and laid his hands on Saul, addressing him as "brother." The Lord Jesus works through His servants when they offer themselves as vessels. Through the act of the laying on of hands, Saul's sight was returned and he was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 17). The return of his sight is described as something like scales falling from his eyes. After Saul regained his sight, he was baptized and he ate. The baptism and the partaking of food indicate that Paul had worked through the traumatic emotional experience of a changed life and had fully submitted to the will of God. He joined the disciples at Damascus and "immediately" began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. The conversion experience of Saul is thrilling and encouraging.

Paul's Early Discipleship Acts 9:19-30

Luke states that Saul continued with the disciples for "several days." He did not delay proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God. Those who heard him in the synagogue were amazed at the reversal of his doctrine and way of life. The one who had been destroying "those who called on this name" began to persuade others that they should believe on this name. The disciples were sceptical at first; the non-believing Jews were amazed. Saul was a student of the Old Testament; he showed the Jews who lived at Damascus that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Messianic Scrip-

Give two influences, mentioned in this paragraph, which prepared Saul for his conversion.

(The preaching and death of Stephen, Saul's knowledge of the Old Testament)

What did Saul's position on the ground symbolize?

(His fall from pride to humility)

What did Saul's blindness symbolize? _____

(His spiritual blindness)

Saul's conversion involved a change from rebelling against the inclusion of _____ in the Kingdom to becoming the _____ to the _____.

(Gentiles, Apostle, Gentiles)

Who was chosen to be the instrument through whom Saul received his sight? _____

(Ananias)

List four actions of Saul immediately after the restoring of his sight.

(was baptized, ate, joined the disciples, proclaimed Jesus)

How long did Saul stay with the disciples?

(several days)

tures.

Luke does not record the sojourn of Saul in Arabia. Saul indicated that he spent three years there (cf. Gal. 1:17-18). He possibly spent the time in a study of Old Testament Scriptures. His experience on the Damascus road changed his interpretation of the Old Testament and his theology. He needed time to assimilate the implications of his Damascus road conversion experience and the Old Testament Scriptures.

Before long, the amazement of the non-believing Jews changed to a desire to kill Saul. The plotting of his death without a trial was an illegal act. The plotters attempted to prevent his escape from the city by watching the gates day and night. Apparently they planned to attack and kill him on an uninhabited stretch of road after he left the city. After the plot was made known to Saul, his disciples helped him to escape at night through an opening in the wall. Opposition from his own countrymen eventually forced Saul to turn to the Gentiles.

According to Galatians 1:16ff., Saul did not go immediately to Jerusalem. He spent some time in Arabia and returned to Damascus before he went to Jerusalem. Saul's confounding of the Jews in Damascus apparently came after his return from Arabia.

After Saul escaped from Damascus, he proceeded to Jerusalem where he spent fifteen days with Peter, and saw James, the Lord's brother (cf. Gal. 1:18f.). When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples were afraid of him, "not believing that he was a disciple." Even though three years or more had elapsed, they vividly remembered his ruthless persecution of Christians and the murder of Stephen. Barnabas who was a man of faith, understanding, and concern for others brought him to the Apostles and assured them that Saul had experienced a genuine conversion. Although Barnabas is virtually unknown because of limited information about him, he is one of the great Christian men of the New Testament. He extended a helping hand to needy widows, to a distrusted Saul, and to a dejected John Mark. The brief references in Acts indicate that he was one of the more mature Christian leaders of his day.

Saul's zeal for Christ soon caused him to become involved in arguments with the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. It is uncertain why the Hellenistic Jews opposed Saul since they were more open to his mission to the Gentiles. It may be that they had not forgotten the persecution which Saul had waged against the Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Some Hellenists who were not Christians may have suffered loss also as a result of Saul's previous persecution. His attempts to convert them to Christianity may have been futile because of their continuing desire for revenge.

Some of the Christian brethren in Jerusalem had heard of the plot of the Hellenistic Jews, and they took Saul to Caesarea where he was put on a boat for Tarsus. Perhaps they did not want to be identified with him lest they should receive the animosity of the enraged Hellenists.

A Summary of Church Expansion in Palestine Acts 9:31-43

After Luke introduced the Apostle who would be sent to the Gentiles and told of his experience of receiving Christ, he returns to the subject of the expansion of the Church in Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria. After Saul was converted, the Church enjoyed peace and continued to increase. An example of her prosperity is taken from Peter's work in Lydda. A man by the name of Aeneas who had been bedridden eight years was healed. The miracle caused many to turn to the Lord.

Another faithful disciple, named Tabitha (Dorcas in the

After several days with the disciples, where did Saul go? _____

How long did he stay there? _____

(Arabia, 3 years)

The non-believing Jews' amazement soon turned to a desire to _____ Saul. Who helped him escape?

(kill, the disciples)

Who stood by Saul before the disciples in Jerusalem?

(Barnabas)

Why did the Jerusalem Christians help Saul escape from the Hellenistic Jews? _____

(They were afraid they would be identified with him and be persecuted also.)

Give two results of Saul's conversion.

(The Church enjoyed peace and continued to increase.)

Greek), became sick and died. She was a mature Christian noted for her kindness and concern for others. The news of Peter's miracles in Lydda had reached Joppa; therefore, the Christians sent two men to invite Peter to come immediately to Joppa. After Peter had dismissed the people from the room where Dorcas' body lay, he prayed for life to be restored to the body and said, "Tabitha, arise." When news spread throughout Joppa that she had been restored to life, many believed in the Lord. Peter continued in Joppa for a period of time and lived with a certain tanner named Simon.

The Conversion of Cornelius
Acts 10:1-48

Cornelius' vision (vv. 1-8)

Cornelius was a Roman centurion who was a devout student of Judaism. He was a God-fearer but not a proselyte, since he had not been circumcised and baptized (cf. 11:3). A centurion was in charge of 100 men in the Italian cohort which numbered 600 men. A cohort was one-tenth of a Roman Legion. Cornelius was stationed at Caesarea, the headquarters of the procurator of Samaria, Judaea, and Idumaea. Caesarea had been previously a great city and was sometimes called Strabo's tower. The city was rebuilt about 12 B.C. by Herod the Great who named it after Augustus Caesar. It had a mixed population of Gentiles and Jews.

Luke gives a very favourable description of the Gentile Cornelius. He described Cornelius as a (1) devout man, (2) one who feared God with all his household, (3) one who gave many alms to the Jewish people, and (4) one who prayed to God continually. Although he was a member of the conquering and ruling nation, he showed respect to the conquered Jewish people.

One afternoon at 3:00, the time of prayer, Cornelius saw a vision of an angel of God who informed him that his prayers and deeds of charity had not gone unnoticed by God. These pious acts had not secured his salvation, but they revealed that Cornelius was ready to follow the Lord. He was instructed to send men to Joppa for Peter who would tell him what to do to be saved. Cornelius sent two of his household slaves, probably young Jewish men, and a devout soldier to Joppa where Peter was lodging with Simon, a certain tanner.

Peter's vision (vv. 10-22)

As the three servants of Cornelius journeyed towards Joppa, Peter went up on the house top at noon to pray. Luke notes that visions are sometimes related to natural desires. Peter was hungry, and while he was waiting for the meal to be prepared, he fell into a trance. He envisaged a great sheet which contained four-footed animals, reptiles, and fowl coming down from heaven. Peter was instructed to kill and eat. As a devout Jew, Peter refused because the animals were considered unholy and unclean. The instructions from the voice came a second and a third time. The voice informed Peter that "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (v. 15—NASB). The sheet then was taken up into the sky.

The Jewish Law prohibited the eating of the meat of animals which—

1. chew the cud but do not have a divided hoof (Lev. 11:4);
2. do not have both fins and scales (Lev. 11:10);
3. feed on refuse or carrion, such as vultures (Lev. 11:13ff.);
4. crawl or are reptiles (Lev. 11:20-29);
5. walk on their paws (Lev. 11:27);
6. have died (Lev. 11:39ff.).

The Law did not prohibit eating insects, such as locusts and

Who was Cornelius? _____

(a God-fearing Roman centurion)

What did the angel tell Cornelius to do?

(send for Peter who would tell him how to be saved)

Luke notes visions are sometimes related to natural

What did the voice tell Peter? _____

(desires, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy")

crickets. Peter was abiding by Jewish Law when he refused to kill and eat the animals which were on the sheet. The purpose of the special vision was to show Peter that what God had made was not to be considered unholy or unclean. The Christian Church does not abide by the Jewish Law of clean and unclean meat because of the special revelation given to Peter.

The vision was applicable also to the relation of Jews to Gentiles. Gentiles were created by God and were not to be considered unholy or unacceptable by the Jews. The Church was not to exclude Gentiles on the basis of Jewish prejudice. The vision was given to prepare Peter for the arrival of the servants of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, but God had chosen him to salvation. It took a special revelation for Peter to be willing to accept a Gentile into the Christian Church. Jewish tradition had practically excluded Gentiles from the Temple. Proselyte Gentiles who had been circumcised could enter the outer court of the Gentiles, but they could not draw as close to God as Israelite men who could enter the inner court of the Israelites. The special vision was designed to break down the inner wall of partition separating Jews and Gentiles. Jews were not to be privileged above Gentiles in the Christian Church.

Peter was unable to interpret the meaning of the vision until he encountered the three men at the gate. They described their mission to him and explained that an angel had directed Cornelius to send for him. The report concerning the vision of Cornelius and the invitation to visit the home of a Gentile enabled Peter to interpret his own vision. Peter had failed previously to understand the teaching of Jesus that "there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him" (Mark 7:15-RSV). The statement was interpreted to mean that all foods are declared clean (Mark 7:19).

Peter's witness to Cornelius (vv. 23-48)

Peter returned with Cornelius' servants. He took with him "brethren from Joppa." Without the special vision from the Lord, Peter would likely have allowed his Jewish prejudice and exclusiveness to prevent his association with Cornelius.

The eagerness of Cornelius for the visit with Peter is revealed by his preparation for his arrival. He had put aside other business for four days and had called together his relatives and close friends to be present when Peter arrived. The hesitation of Peter is in contrast to the eagerness of Cornelius. When Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshipped him. This was an unusual gesture from a Roman to a Jew. Peter "took him up", stating that he too was just a man. The full meaning of Peter's vision became clear as he entered the house and saw the assembled Gentiles. He explained that a Jew was not permitted to associate with a foreigner, especially to enter into his house; however, God had shown him that no man was to be considered unholy or unclean. Peter exposed himself to severe criticism when he entered the house of the Gentile (cf. 11:2ff.). Even though he was acting in obedience to the revelation from God, it would not be easy for him to face his Jewish brethren. Before passing harsh judgement on Peter, one should examine his own willingness to risk the scorn of his people by breaking the national custom of helping foreigners, especially those from conquering nations.

Peter asked Cornelius why he had been requested to come. Cornelius described the vision which he had experienced four days earlier. In his gracious manner, Cornelius recognized that Peter had been "kind enough to come" (v. 33). Cornelius then requested Peter to share what the Lord had commanded.

In the address of Peter, it was recognized that God shows no partiality. The Jews had failed to understand that they were chosen for service instead of being chosen as favourites because of

What was the purpose of Peter's vision?

(to show that what God has made is not to be considered unholy or unclean)

The vision was applicable to the relation of _____ to _____. It was given to Peter to prepare him for the arrival of the servants of _____
(Jews, Gentiles, Cornelius)

Did Peter go alone with Cornelius' servants?
_____. Who went with him? _____
(no, brethren from Joppa)

When did the full meaning of Peter's vision become evident to him? _____

(when he entered Cornelius' house and saw the Gentiles assembled there)

their merits. God's blessings had been bestowed upon them in order that all the world might be blessed through them. The Jews mistakenly had interpreted God's blessings as an indication that they were His favourites. Selection for service and selection because of favouritism are easily confused.

Recognition of the truth that God has no favourites was necessary for Peter to be willing to share the Gospel of Christ. Peter's sermon included:

1. Jesus' ministry and teachings. Peter emphasized that God had empowered Jesus with the Holy Spirit through whom the miracles of healing were accomplished. "God was with him" in the person of the Holy Spirit (v. 38).
2. His death and resurrection. After describing His death on the cross, Peter affirmed the resurrection of Jesus. A primary task of the Apostles was to bear witness of the post-resurrection appearances.
3. His Judgeship or Messiahship. The teachings of Jesus interpreted in the light of his death and resurrection were to be preached to the people because they were responsible to their Judge whom God had appointed.
4. His fulfilment of Old Testament Scriptures. The prophets had predicted His coming as a suffering Messiah. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament had prepared for His atoning death on the cross.
5. His willingness to forgive sins. Every person should believe on Him and receive forgiveness for sins. The climax of Peter's sermon came when he stated, "whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (v. 43).

Peter had been rather negative in his approach to Cornelius, explaining that since he was a Jew he was reluctant to be joined to one of another nation. Philip had rejoiced to share with the Ethiopian in the chariot. Peter had not refused to witness to a foreigner, but he was reluctant. It took a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit to convince Peter that Gentiles could be born into the Kingdom of God. As Peter spoke, the Holy Spirit came upon those who listened. The gift of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by the speaking with tongues and exalting God. The circumcised believers (Jewish Christians) who had come with Peter were amazed that the Gentiles also could receive the gift of the Spirit. The speaking in tongues to give evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit was necessary to convince Peter and his Jewish companions that Gentiles should be baptized and received into the Church. According to God's plan, there was to be "no hindrance" to the salvation of the Gentiles.

The tongues at Caesarea appear to have been some form of praise to God. The gift of tongues on this occasion had the special purpose of convincing the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles had been born into the Kingdom. The special demonstration of God's approval removed all hindrances to their baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter's Defence for His Association with Gentiles Acts 11:1-18

Peter had shown wisdom in taking six Jewish Christians with him to Caesarea to witness the conversion of the Gentiles. When word spread in Jerusalem that the Gentiles had received the Word of God, those of the circumcision took issue with Peter (v. 2). Jews were reconciled to a very loose association with Gentiles who had been circumcised, but they were unwilling to have any dealings with the uncircumcised. Part of their problem was pride, and part of it was a poor interpretation of the Old Testament.

The Jews had confused their being chosen for _____ with their being chosen for merit.
(service)

List briefly the main points of Peter's sermon to Cornelius.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

What finally convinced Peter and the Jewish Christians that Gentiles could be born into the Kingdom of God? _____

(The Gentiles received the gift of the Holy Spirit.)

What was the purpose of the gift of tongues on this occasion? _____

(to convince Jewish Christians that Gentiles had been born into the Kingdom)

Man's relationship to God, as expressed in the Old Testament, is set forth in terms of a covenant. Those who entered covenant relation with God demonstrated their vows by the sign of circumcision. Unfortunately, the sign became a substitute for the genuine covenant vow or relationship. The Church had to solve the question of how Christians would demonstrate their relationship to God through Christ. Should the New Covenant continue to be symbolized by circumcision?

Pride also was involved in the requirement for the Gentiles to be circumcised. Even though the Jewish people were subject to Rome, they considered their nation to be superior because they were Yahweh's elect. They had confused election to honour with election to service. Foreigners who desired to worship the one God who had revealed Himself through Israel must submit to rituals which identified them with the Jewish nation. The merging of Jewish religion and citizenship is more easily understood when one considers the rabbinic theology of pleasing God through keeping the Law which would result in the coming of a political messiah.

Peter was called to give account of his association with the uncircumcised. He related his vision in Joppa, stressing the words of the voice from heaven: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (v. 9). When the three men came from Caesarea to Joppa, Peter related, "the Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings" (v. 12—NASB). He wisely had taken six Jewish Christians with him to witness the conversion of the Gentiles. The vision of Cornelius gave further evidence that Peter's actions were according to the will of God. After the Holy Spirit filled the Gentiles just as He had the Jews at Pentecost, who could stand in God's way? (v. 17). Pride and prejudice may have caused the Jewish Christians to regret at first that God had "also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (v. 18).

With the experience of Philip and Peter, the Gospel became unshackled sufficiently to include God-fearing Gentiles. The battle for complete liberation and the removal of the "middle wall of partition" which separated Jews and Gentiles had just begun.

List two problems which made Jewish Christians unwilling to accept uncircumcised Gentiles.

(pride, misinterpretation of the O.T.)

Peter presented two proofs to convince the Jerusalem Christians that God had accepted the Gentiles:

1. The visions of both _____ and _____
2. The filling of the _____ with the _____

(Peter, Cornelius, Gentiles, Spirit)

Home Study Assignment

Basic study (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. How did Saul's conversion affect the early Church? _____

2. Why was Saul on the road to Damascus? _____

3. Name two influences which prepared Saul for conversion. _____

4. What did Saul's physical blindness symbolize? _____

5. What did Saul do after "several days" with the disciples? _____

6. How did the attitude of the Jews of Damascus change towards Saul? _____

7. Why did the Christians of Jerusalem put Saul on a boat for Tarsus? _____

8. Who was Cornelius? _____
9. What did the angel instruct Cornelius to do? _____

10. Why was the vision of the sheet and animals given to Peter? _____

11. List the main points of Peter's sermon to Cornelius.
 - (1) _____
 - (2) _____
 - (3) _____
 - (4) _____

(5) _____

12. Why was the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in tongues necessary after Peter preached to Cornelius? —

13. Name two proofs Peter presented to the Jerusalem Christians to convince them that God had accepted the Gentiles. (1) _____

_____ (2) _____

Supplementary activities (Levels 2 and 3):

1. What changes did Paul's conversion bring to his life?
2. Outline the activities of Paul from his conversion to the taking of the offering to Jerusalem (Acts 11:30).

Advanced activities (Level 3):

1. Read pages 109–124 in *The Book of Acts* by Frank Stagg.
2. How does the reception of the Holy Spirit relate to baptism?
3. Did Peter open the door to Gentiles?

Seminar Discussion

1. Is Peter's apology for entering the house of a Gentile understandable or justifiable? Why?
2. Why was the resurrection so important in Apostolic preaching?
3. Should the Church today expect to speak in tongues or was the manifestation of the Spirit given to Cornelius intended to meet a special need at that time?