

## THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

### (5) A Consecrated Needle!

**Acts 9:32-43** sees Peter on a pastoral visit in the coastal area to the northwest of Jerusalem, ending up at Lydda. Among the believers was a palsied man, Aeneas, whom Peter healed in the name of Jesus Christ. Once again Peter was given special power that he rightly used to the glory of God. As a result, “all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord.”

The word spread to nearby Joppa, 61 kilometres from Jerusalem, and the main seaport of Judea. (Today it is known as Jaffa and is a suburb of Tel Aviv.) That brings us to the delightful story of Tabitha, or Dorcas, (both names mean “gazelle”) the disciple with the consecrated needle! She may never have spoken a word of enlightenment to enquiring minds, but she glowed with the spirit of Christ and brought His love to many who needed it so much. No wonder it seemed such a tragedy when she died! But Peter sent all the mourners out of the room so that he could be alone with God and allow His Spirit to work through Him in the calm of unwavering faith. God honoured that faith and in His will He restored Dorcas to life. Once again the result was many more people coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

***Some people differentiate between the “saving gospel” and the “social gospel” but is there a difference? Where does our responsibility as Christians lie? Before Jesus came, there were no social services such as hospitals, asylums, orphanages, leprosaria, or international relief. These all sprang out of the grace and love of God as demonstrated in the lives of Christians.***

Verse 43 shows that a great change was happening in Peter’s life, in the fact that in Joppa he was prepared to stay with Simon the tanner. A tanner was involved in the treatment of the skins of dead animals, thus becoming “unclean” according to Jewish law, and despised by many. So Peter was already showing a willingness to reject Jewish prejudice – an attitude that was to have ground-breaking results, as we shall see in the next chapter. Peter was also being very gracious in being Simon’s guest – a tanner’s workplace exuded quite a “pong”, so much so that if a girl was engaged to a man and subsequently discovered he was a tanner, she could break off the engagement with impunity!

### One Giant Leap for the Church!

We come to the very significant **Chapter 10**. Jesus had told the apostles just before His ascension that they would be His witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, but in fact it was not months but *about 10 years later* that the apostles actually got around to carrying out that command! And even then, it was not that they went to the Gentiles - it was a Gentile who came to them, seeking the truth! At this time there was an earnest minority among many people of other nations who were dissatisfied with their own corrupt, mystery religions and who had found in the Septuagint (accessible to all in the Greek language) and the Jewish synagogue, a purity and high ethical and moral standard emanating from the worship of the one true God, which was profoundly satisfying to their soul and called forth their own worship. They were known as “God-fearers” and were admitted to the fringes of Judaism.

We meet one of these in **verses 1-8**, Cornelius, a senior centurion in command of an elite cohort of Roman soldiers stationed at Caesarea, the Roman garrison town and seat of government. The type of centurion that we meet in the New Testament suggests that the Romans were careful to assign only the most responsible and able men to the difficult task of duty in the turbulent Jewish territory. The Roman centurions provided the necessary stability to the entire Roman system. They seemed to be noble in character and deed. “Devout and God-fearing”, Cornelius had influenced not only his whole family, but also some of those under his command, to follow his example. His faith was reflected in practical ways as he gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly. He was following the Jewish practice of praying at 3 o’clock in the afternoon when he had the vision of the angel.

The angel had a lovely word for him – his gifts and prayers were like a memorial offering to God, a symbol echoed in Revelation 5:8, where the prayers of the saints are likened to incense rising up to God. It was not the traditional Jewish offering of animals - a practice that began to die out soon after Jesus' death – but God looks on the heart and was pleased with the sincerity in the worship Cornelius offered Him.

***Do we have to be in church to worship God? Where else can we worship Him? How can we do this?***

The angel gave Cornelius specific instructions, and such details were soon to be a sign to Peter that the message had come from God. Humbly, Cornelius obeyed, confiding in 2 of his servants and “a devout soldier” and sending them off to Joppa.

***Why didn't the angel just tell Cornelius the gospel story while he was at it? That would have been easier for all concerned than the 2-day journey to Joppa and back! God knew what He was doing!***

**Meanwhile, back at the tanner's house .....**

**Acts 10:9-23** begins with Peter praying on the roof at noon – a good position to be in, to receive a new revelation from God! Praying is not only talking to God – it is listening to Him as well! His tanner friend had no doubt stretched a leather awning over the couch to shade Peter from the sun, and from this situation arose the vision that came straight from God. Peter's startled objection that God should ask him to eat anything “unclean” arose from the strict food laws that Jews had kept from the days of Moses, laws that were essential to their health in their desert wanderings. We smile at the contradiction of his “Not so, Lord!” but how often have we done that ourselves?! He was soon to discover that “even the Gentiles”, whom Jews regarded as “unclean”, could and would be made clean by God Himself.

The message was reinforced as the vision was repeated twice, and at that very moment, in God's perfect timing, the messengers from Cornelius arrived at the gate. Encouraged by the Spirit to respond to these visitors, Peter went down to the gate and was doubtless over-awed at their news. Fresh from the impact of his vision, Peter, in one glorious Jewish-custom-breaking step, invited these *Gentiles* into the house! I admire his host, the tanner Simon, who was apparently quite happy to accommodate these men as well. Already the walls were beginning to be broken down.

***What are some barriers that prevent people from being attracted to the Church and Christians? Are we guilty of even unconsciously raising walls around ourselves?***

**A Ripe Harvest.**

In **Chapter 10:23-43** we see that Peter, in agreeing to go to Cornelius, had the good sense to take along 6 of his fellow-believers as witnesses and companions. In even going to a Gentile's house Peter was about to break another ground rule of Jewish social life and it was best not to take such a giant step alone. But at the dramatic moment when Jew encountered Gentile, Peter, though still talking of “our law”, showed a new humility in refusing the worship of Cornelius.

Can you imagine Peter's feelings when, daringly entering into this Gentile house, he found a “large gathering of people” eager and ready to hear about God? He was learning quickly. Already he could say, “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” Then his polite question, “May I ask why you sent for me?”

At the awesome answer of Cornelius, with his humble “it was good of you to come”, another constricting band that had bound Peter snapped off completely, and he launched into this third great recorded sermon in which Jesus Christ was central and supreme. As an eye-witness Peter was tremendously impressed by the fact that the risen Lord had actually eaten with them. Gearing his message to those outside Judaism, he made only a passing reference to the fact that the Old Testament prophets had foretold the gospel story, and

brought his sermon to a dramatic climax in that “*everyone* who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”

**Verses 44-46** reveal God’s gracious confirmation of Peter’s message in what is sometimes called the “Gentile Pentecost”. To the utter astonishment of Peter and his Jewish friends, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all those eager Gentiles as they received the gospel message! To his credit, in **verses 47,48**, Peter responded just as he should have done: the new believers were baptised and for the next few days, Jew and Gentile together in harmony learnt more of the riches of the Scriptures as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

***How ready are we to recognize the working of God in different ways, in different cultures from our own? Are we scandalized, critical or accepting?***

### **Repercussions!**

Then **Chapter 11:1-18** comes as rather a shock. Even in those days, news travelled fast, especially such astounding news, and this cataclysmic event soon became known to the apostles and believers *throughout Judea*. Back in Jerusalem the mainline stalwarts were ready with their criticism, for it is always easier to criticise than to rejoice in another’s success. You can just see their turned-up noses and reproachful eyes as they intoned, “*You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.*” Tut-tut indeed!!

But Peter was gracious in reply, keeping the lines of communication open, and no doubt very thankful that he had taken along the 6 witnesses to back him up! He simply told his story and the dove-tailing of events that led him to Cornelius, finishing with the challenge “So if God gave them the same gift as He gave us ..... who was I to think that I could oppose God?” The Jews had no answer to that, and at least had the grace to admit “So then God has granted *even the Gentiles* repentance unto life.” Later, Paul was to say, in Colossians 1:27, “God has chosen to make known *among the Gentiles* the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

***A “mystery” in the New Testament denotes a truth that was concealed in the Old Testament but revealed in the person and work of the risen Christ. Take time to wonder at that greatest of mysteries – “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Whose glory?***

### **A Miraculous Escape.**

We turn to **Chapter 12:1-18** for our last encounter with Peter – and one in which his growth into spiritual maturity is wonderfully evident. King Herod – no less cruel and wicked than his grandfather, Herod the Great – decided to do a little persecuting of the Church and arrested some of the believers. James, the brother of John, though silent all through the Gospels, must have had a good standing among the believers, for Herod decided to pick on him as one of the leaders and create an example by having him killed by the sword. The hardline Jews were ecstatic and Herod, grabbing the chance to enhance his popularity, proceeded to imprison Peter, another leader of the hated sect.

**Verse 3** tells us that this was in Passover Week and by law Herod could not bring Peter to judgement until the Feast was over : in the meantime Peter was secured by 2 chains and 4 soldiers in an inner cell. Did Passover Week bring back memories for Peter? Though about 10 years ago, would he still have remembered his boastful words in **Luke 22:33** – “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death”? There followed his denial of even knowing Jesus, as we know only too well.

But what happened this time? This time, Peter meant the words. Here he was indeed, in prison and, in view of James’ martyrdom, facing almost certain death the very next day. How was Peter spending what he might have thought to have been his last night alive? Was he desperately praying? Was he in turmoil, thinking God had forsaken him? Was he frantically trying to square accounts with God, in case any sin remained unforgiven? No, none of that. In fact, *Peter was sleeping!* Peter, through the ministry of the

Holy Spirit, had come to the place of complete and restful trust in God his Father: if he was to die in the morning, well, that was okay, he would be reunited with his beloved Lord Jesus. And so he slept!

***Imagine you are in prison and expecting to be condemned to death the next day. How would you spend your last night on earth? Peacefully sleeping?!!!***

But in fact now was the time for action! Suddenly an angel of the Lord brought light into the cell, rousing Peter and bidding him dress quickly. Peter's slumber had been so deep that he thought he was dreaming, as his chains fell off, the guards remained totally unaware of any action and the prison doors silently opened! Even the iron gate leading into the city opened of its own accord, and the angel led onwards for the length of one street before disappearing.

It was only then that Peter realised God Himself had wrought a miracle and set him free. We see in all this a magnificent miracle, and of course it was. But in one sense it was second to the greater miracle – the fact that the tumultuous Peter had had a good night's sleep! We are so slow to recognize miracles around us – the miracle of a personality transformed by the power of God, the miracle of our own growing faith in the goodness of our Father. In fact, all growth, in all created forms, is a miracle. If a plant is not growing, it is dying. Life is growth. And if we are not growing spiritually, we are going backwards.

Coming quickly to his senses, Peter made his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, most likely the same place where Jesus had inaugurated the Lord's Supper. It seems she was a wealthy woman and well able to cope with the numbers of believers that met regularly at her house. **Mark 14:51** talks of a young man whom many believe to be Mark himself: the fact that he was wearing an expensive linen garment, instead of the usual wool, indicates he came from a wealthy family.

We are apt to laugh today at the prayer meeting that got interrupted by the answer which nobody could believe! We are no better! We wonder if that same faithful group had prayed for James as well: there was no "yes" from God to that, and maybe their expectations of His power had wilted somewhat. Ironical that the locked prison doors had been opened, while the door of the believers' meeting was kept shut! Peter's knuckles must have been sore by the time they got around to investigating this phenomenon and got over the shock! As for Peter he knew that discretion was the better part of valour, and charging them to let James (the brother of Jesus and the recognized leader of the Church in Jerusalem) know of his escape, he moved himself without further delay, out of harm's way.

***Why do some prayers get "answered" and others don't? Is it that we don't recognize the answer when it is not the one we wanted? Have we enough trust in God to accept His "no" as the best answer for us?***

### **The Judgement of God.**

**Verses 19-23** indicate the type of man Herod was. Cruel, self-seeking, and full of self-importance, he was soon to suffer a painful death. God's ways are not the ways of men: the condemned Peter was given life, the seemingly powerful despot was given death. What an encouragement to us while we endure the turmoil of this world! **Verse 24** reminds us Who is in control, as the word of God continued to increase and spread." He is worthy of our trust!

