

Study on Acts no.9

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[0 : 00] Let us turn now to consider words you will find in the passage we read in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, and will take us out connecting link, verse 29.

Peter's words to Cornelius, Therefore came I unto you without gain, saying, as soon as I was sent for, I ask therefore, for what intent ye have sent for me?

Now, when I began the studies in the Book of Acts last October, I had no intention whatsoever of finding myself dealing with chapters 10 and 11 come the following May.

But God has a purpose in all things, and he has a purpose in interrupting these studies as he has a purpose in everything else.

And so tonight I would like to resume our studies in the Book of Acts on Sabbath evenings. You won't remember that we finished off these studies last December with a look at the conversion of Saul of Tarshish.

[1 : 57] And that really was a convenient stopping point in the studies because it marked a change in the development and in the extension of the Christian church.

And indeed, the conversion of Paul marks a change of direction in the narrative that we have in the Book of Acts. Far from the time of his conversion onwards, the book really revolves around that man and his place in the extension of the Christian church, particularly to the Gentile world.

But the Holy Spirit, who is the author of the Bible and the author of the Book of Acts, saw fit to stay for a little while with this man, Peter, before he began to unfold for us something of the work that God was to do through Paul.

Peter had been the dominant figure in the first five or six years of the church's work, particularly in Jerusalem.

It was he who had preached that great sermon at Pentecost where so many thousands had been converted. It was he who had been the spokesman for the Christian church when confronted by the opposition of the authorities.

[3 : 42] And the Holy Spirit, as it were, wants to give us one last look at this man before the story unfolds more particularly, as I said, around Saul of Tarshish.

And there are two incidents in particular that are associated with Peter in chapters 10, 11, and 12 that I want to deal with one of them tonight and, God willing, the other one next Sabbath evening.

The first is the one before us here tonight, his place in the conversion of Cornelius, the Italian professional soldier, the non-commissioned officer who was with the Roman army in Caesarea.

The other incident centers around Peter's imprisonment by Herod and his wonderful deliverance by the angel and his appearance at the door of the house where they were holding a prayer meeting for his actual release.

But that will wait until next week. Tonight, Cornelius, this interesting individual and his conversion to the Christian faith.

[5 : 00] Now, this morning I spoke about the problem that the Jews posed for the Egyptians nearly 400 years after Joseph's death in Egypt.

Tonight, the Buddhists were on the other foot. The problem that the Gentiles posed for the Jews during the first five or six years of the Christian church's mission to the world.

You see, for the Jews, as Peter told Cornelius, it was not lawful for them to associate at all with Gentiles.

And when the Christian church, during, as I said, the first five or six years, was comprised mainly of Jewish converts, this problem was bound to come to light.

In the course of time, they had to grapple with the question, what are we, as Christian Jews and members of the Christian church, going to do about the Gentiles?

[6 : 13] There were many prejudices and scruples that had to be put to one side and indeed overcome. And it's interesting to see how the Lord was preparing Peter as the man who was going to be instrumental in removing these prejudices.

Peter, the great Jew himself, and man, the one who was as full of prejudices as anybody else. At the end of chapter 9, we read that Peter stayed in Jobba for a few days with a man who was called Simon, a tanner.

That is, a man who was engaged in leather craft, working with leather. And this, of course, was an occupation undertaken by many Gentiles.

And because of their contact necessarily with the carcasses of animals, dead animals, using their skin for the production of their own particular brand of leather craft, because of their connection with dead animals, they were to the Jew ceremonially unclean.

And therefore, a religious Jew wouldn't associate with a man who was a tanner who worked in the leather trade. And therefore, the Lord was working at Peter's life, taking some of these prejudices away when we find him staying for a while in the house of a man who was engaged in this kind of industry.

[8 : 04] And in years come, I have no doubt that Peter would look back and see how the hand of the Lord was mysteriously guiding him and preparing him for the work that he had for him.

I'm sure that there are some of you here tonight who, if you are so concerned, could look back and see the hand of God preparing yourselves and working in your lives for a particular reason that you didn't know of at the time.

But then it came to light, perhaps. It has come to light for you now why the Lord was moving you in that particular direction. The work that God had for Peter was to bring, at this time, was to bring the gospel to this great Gentile country, to Caesarea.

And particularly to this man Cornelius. Now there were two things that the Lord did. One of them I mentioned. He was working on Peter, removing the prejudices by making it possible for him and permissible for him as a Jew to lodge with this man, Simon.

But there was something else that the Lord did for him. He had a vision. One day as he had a sort of siesta, afternoon siesta, in his house top, flat roofed house.

[9 : 28] He saw in a trance this vision, this sheet let down from heaven, not at the four corners. And we've read about it two or three times already tonight. No need to go over it. No need to go over the details.

You know, it was full of all kinds of animals. And the Lord said to him, rise Peter, eat. And you know, it's wonderful you know how accurate the Holy Spirit is in communicating information.

You know, look at how true to character Peter is in his response to the Lord's command. Rise and eat. Typical Peter, putting the Lord himself right, not for the first time, not so Lord.

I won't do that because I would never eat something that is unclean or common. You see, there were certain foods that the Jews weren't allowed to eat.

And because of that background, there are some people, and I've got a book on my desk at the moment actually, which is devoted to this kind of thing. Because of this, the Jewish dietary laws forbidding them to eat of certain kinds of meat and so on, there are some people who think that the vision that Peter got was meant to convey to him and to everybody since that you're allowed to eat anything.

[10 : 44] That there are no dietary laws, no obligatory upon any individual. Now, the theory is quite a fascinating one.

But I don't think that it is at all biblically accurate to state that. The vision that Paul, that Peter got here, had nothing whatsoever to do with Peter's diet as a Jew.

It had everything to do with Peter's prejudices as a Jew. You see, he was prejudiced against the Gentiles. And if, as we believe he was, wanting to bring the gospel to people, wanting to help people, the unfortunate thing is that the last person that Peter would really want to help but bring the gospel to would be a Gentile.

He would far rather go to the Jew than he would to the Gentile. That was part of his group. It was part of his prejudices. In the same way, I'm afraid, that some of ourselves have these prejudices towards the outsider.

In this part of the world, yes, in another part of the world, you, you, you, you, it's always to your own people first. And God was going to show Peter that there was no distinction between men in their

relationship with God, be they Jew or Gentile.

[12:12] And this was the purpose of the mission and Peter recognized it. It was an illustration. It was a typical thing through which Peter was taught one great thing.

The Lord was saying to Peter, don't you dare be prejudiced against one race just because you happen to belong to another race.

All men, Jew and Gentile, stand as sinners before me in need. And that was the purpose of the vision Peter himself recognized because he said to Cornelius and he said to the Jewish authorities afterwards, I was taught by God in a vision.

not to make distinctions in the human race and to say that one man was more worthy before God than another.

I discovered, he said, in a very wonderful way, very wonderful way that before God all men are equal in this respect.

[13:18] They are all sinners who need salvation. And you and I ought to be very careful that we don't fall into the trap of saying as I said by some people in certain situations, all men are equal but some are more equal than others.

That is not the case. You and I here tonight, no matter what your background, no matter what your views, no matter what your prejudices, no matter what your opinions, you remember this, you and I tonight in the sight of God are on this equal basis, we are sinners and we need God.

And that was a great lesson that Peter was told. And he was told that there was a man particularly who needed God and that man was Cornelius.

Now, the narrative as it unfolds heaps up as it were the supernatural guidance that was given to Cornelius and to Peter.

Vision is added to vision, revelation to revelation. Cornelius receives a vision, Peter receives a vision. Cornelius is praying, Peter is praying.

[14:44] We are given an account of Cornelius' character. We are given an account of the three men who were sent in a very wonderful way and came in contact with Peter at Jerusalem. And we are told how Peter travelled 35 to 40 miles to Caesarea to see this man.

We are given an account of his interview with Cornelius and his question. Cornelius, I'll tell you why I'm here. I've got a vision. Now he says, you tell me, why have you sent for me?

And so he elicits from Cornelius the account of his vision from the Lord. And then Peter, in response to the invitation from Cornelius who had gathered a lot of people in his home, preached the gospel to them.

And as a result of the sermon, Cornelius and others were converted. Now then, I would like to look at this account with you tonight and apply it as we go along to our own situation here in Stornoway. Let's have a wee look first of all at this man, Cornelius. Now I said that he was what you would probably call today a non-commissioned officer in the Roman army. He was, we see here in chapter 10, an Italian.

[16:03] He was an Italian. Italian. And in one way or another he had become a very religious man. We're not told how, but he was indeed a religious man. And his religion embraced not just himself but his family, as I said this morning.

This is the importance of religion and indeed the importance of the Christian faith, the Christian religion, that it takes within its fold the family.

I mentioned this morning to you parents, and I say it again tonight, that you make sure that as a parent, you just don't appear in the house of God without bringing your family with you.

It's all too easy in certain situations to do that kind of thing. And I think that part of this congregation's great strength through the years has been the emphasis that has been placed upon family religion.

And it may interest you to know, that even last week I had a visit from someone from the BBC who wondered, who had discovered about the strength of family religious life in the island and particularly in the town and wondered why it was so strong here when it was becoming so weak in other parts of the land.

[17:32] and you remember that you're playing a very vital part, not only in the upbringing of your own family, but in the retention of the Christian religion at its best in this place, when you present yourself as the head of your family with your family in the house of God.

God. As I said in the morning, no man ever loses with God, and they who honour him, God will honour them. And this was particularly born out in the case of Cornelius. he brought his religion into his family. In a very simple way you can do this, for example, even when you respond in thanksgiving to God for the food that he gives and the blessings that he gives you. When you gather them round you for family worship. And we live in a day when it is becoming increasingly difficult. There are so many pressures brought to bear upon you. Life is going at such a pace from the very early morning to the very late hour at night. Going at such a pace that it may be difficult for you to gather your family together around the Bible. Well, no matter how difficult it is, even if you only do it for two or three minutes, do it. [18:49] Do it. And you won't regret it. And if you can at all give more time to it, by all means, do that as well. Well, Cornelius was that time. He was also very charitable.

He gave as he saw the needs of people arising. He was upright in his character. He was God honoring. He was a seeker after salvation.

There is no doubt at all about that. He was groping for something that he didn't have. A seeker, as someone has put it, whose religious experience constrained him to act as God would have him act. And there was one thing in his life I want to lay emphasis on. The importance of prayer in his life. It was he himself who said that it was about the ninth hour that he was praying when he had this vision.

Now this is important. You know that ninth hour for the Jew was a very important hour. Roughly three o'clock in the afternoon. The time of the afternoon or the evening sacrifice. The time that we sang about there in Psalm 141 and Psalm 5.

[19:53] I will lift my heart to these of the psalmists as the uplifting of the evening sacrifice. That was a time when the Jews prayed. One of the stated times of prayer.

Three o'clock. Well this man who wasn't a Jew but was very religious was praying when he had this wonderful vision, this wonderful experience.

Now some of you may wonder and I often wonder myself, what was Cornelius praying for? What do you think he was praying for? We were not told. But I don't think it would do us any harm to engage in some conjecture here just for a minute.

No one ever prays to God as a seeker but one who asks God to remember him. Asks God to help him, to guide him, to show him the right way, to give him light and understanding, to give him peace and deliverance, give him satisfaction and contentment.

Some of you here tonight, like Cornelius, groping in the dark, the Christian religion has had so much influence upon your life. It has directed you along a certain channel.

[20:59] So far, so good. But you know that you need more than that. There may be something missing in your life, something more vital than that. And what is it? Well you might find it difficult to explain what it is but at least you're asking God to show you what it is.

Well my friend, let me encourage you. I don't think that there is an account in the history of mankind of a prayer ascending for these things that wasn't answered in the affirmative by God.

Cornelius, we believe, was looking for these things. There was a work going on in his life. But as yet he lacked the assurance, the certainty of salvation.

He needed to be directed to a saviour. He needed to know this saviour for himself. And so it is, I said already, in the case of some of you perhaps influenced by the truth.

But you feel a thing lacking, there's something lacking in your life. And you wonder what it is. And no one knows how much time you spend in prayer. No one knows when the light goes out.

[22:08] How you breathe a prayer heavenward. and wish that God would speak to you and give you what you need most in life. You're not able to put your finger on what it is.

But you have this hope. God knows what it is. And you're praying that he will give it to you. Well now, how was Cornelius' prayer answered?

Well you know, there are several things here that come to light. And there's a topic here that, as I said a few weeks ago, I feel my self, the longer I go on, the more I love this topic.

The wonderful providence of God. How wonderful God works to bring his own blessing to bear upon people. There were extraordinary and miraculous occurrences in the life of this man, Cornelius.

For example, he had a vision. He saw an angel. He heard the voice of the angel speaking to him. He was given a message direct from heaven.

[23 : 14] Send three men to Jerusalem to a man called Simon. He was lodging in the house of a man called Simon the Tanner. At the same time, or rather the following day, another man also had a vision.

Peter in Jerusalem. And he was told that three men were coming to see him, to listen to them, and to go with them, and not doubt.

Now this was a case, undoubtedly, where you see in the words of another, the concurrence of various means towards the accomplishment of one great end.

end. There were various things and various wonderful things working together. Look at it like this, if I could simplify it. Jerusalem was 30 to 40 miles from Caesarea.

In Caesarea, there you have a man, Cornelius, praying for help. Another man, 30 miles away in Jerusalem, is unaware of this particular man's need.

[24 : 28] And as I said earlier, if he wanted to help, I sure that Caesarea would be the last place that he would have gone to. But you see, prayer is a very important thing.

As one man prays in Caesarea, another man is praying 30 or 40 miles away in Jerusalem. And as Cornelius prays, a message is sent to him.

As Peter prays, a message is sent to him. And in a way unknown to them both, they are drawn together to that point, when under Peter's ministry, Cornelius would believe the gospel preached by Peter.

And you know, stories abound of the way people have been brought together by the wonderful providence of God to hear the gospel preached.

It's wonderful how God works. And I would only tire you, I'm sure, by telling you some of these stories. I told the story already, I'm sure I did. Perhaps not even not that long ago, but I love it and I can't help telling it.

[25 : 47] And I can't, I'm thankful to God that I was present in the place where the things were told some years ago. Two men speaking to a question meeting and the church at back at a quarterly meeting.

An old man, an old, old elder from Shabbos stood up and told how God had converted him in a church in Glasgow. He had gone into that church not to listen to the gospel at all, but to see someone who was supposed to have been converted and didn't believe and went in there to laugh at him.

As a young, as a young apprentice in Glasgow, God laid his hand on him and converted him in that service and he came out of the church a changed man. Then the next man who stood up at the question spoke and he says, you know, he said, I'm amazed to hear that testimony.

When I think, he said, the number of times I went into the same church as a young student in Glasgow, praying that God would save me and I came out of it.

Just as I went into it. Ah, the wonderful providence of God, but of course in the providence of God, that student was brought to recognize, to know the Lord as a savior.

[27 : 02] You heard the story. I'm sure I told the story as well. I know a man who's on the mission field today in a, in Fiji.

And he was in the British Air Force stationed in Germany. He was brought up as a Methodist in Fiji. And he didn't really know the gospel at all, though he knew a bit about the church and he knew lots of hymns.

And he was bored one night in his billet and a friend of his at a radio asked, he asked his friend for the use of his transistor and he was fiddling around with the knobs.

He said, I was looking for Radio Luxembourg. You know where it is, two, eight meters, that's where it used to be. And so I was fiddling around with the knobs and I heard he said this, the words of this hymn and I recognized the words of the hymn from my boy who days in Fiji.

It was a gospel hymn. And I listened. And the man began to speak to preach the gospel. He'd never heard the gospel in his life. And he was arrested.

[28 : 11] And he thought to himself tomorrow night, he says, he took note of the time and he noted where the wave band was. And he says, I must tune into this tomorrow night. His friend in the meantime the following day came and took the radio away and he was left the following night without a radio.

It was near Christmas time and he wrote home. And he suggested to a brother of his that a good Christmas present for him would be a radio. And he gave him one. The first thing I did, he said,

when I got it, I switched it on and I looked for this wave band and I found it. I found the station. The same man preaching the same gospel. And he was converted there that night and today is on the mission field. Back in his own homeland of Fiji. The providence of God working, bringing people together towards the one great end that they might be saved. My friend, let me ask you a question. Here you are in this church in Stornoway tonight, yet again, perhaps for all I know for the first time. [29 : 19] What brings you here? What brings you here? Listen to what Cornelius said to Peter. I sent for thee, he said. And thou hast done well that thou art come.

Now therefore, we are all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.

The same thing applies to this church tonight. We are all here present before God. Brought from various areas, different backgrounds in different ways.

Perhaps different things have brought you here tonight. Something has brought you, something else may have brought someone else, but we're here to hear the wonderful words of God and brought together by the wonderful providence of God.

And that's why I said, and I believe this with all my heart, the older a person gets in the Christian faith, the more he comes to love, the special providence of God, the things, if I may use the words in inverted commas, the things that go to make up the most important event in one's life.

[30 : 38] Someone praying there, another praying somewhere else, and God uses both prayers to bring them together in the Lord.

Is your life enriched by such things in the providence of God? Can you think of these occurrences in your own life that God has used to bring you to a place where God richly blessed your soul and you'll never stop praising him, that that was the way he did it?

Well, that was present in this man's conversion, I believe is present in every single conversion. The wonderful providence of God, as someone put it, the apostles were hearty believers in the doctrine of God's special providence.

Now then, I say this to you, I'll say it again a minute when we come to conclude the service, I know that you shouldn't look for visions and dreams and angels and the miraculous and the extraordinary in your life, I know that.

But at the same time, my friend, you keep a keen eye open for the special providence of God in your own life. It's there if you had an eye to see it.

[32 : 03] But these special things did not convert this man. the vision he had, the angel he saw, the word he heard, none of these things converted him.

The prayers he was offering, the religious duties he was engaged in, his charity, none of these things converted this man. He was so genuine, but none of these things converted him.

What then did? Well, this is the third thing I come to. The thing that did it was the truth blessed to him by the power of the Spirit.

You have Peter's sermon delivered in the presence of this man, recorded in chapter 10 from verse 34 to the end of it. And I just want very briefly to tell you the main thrust of the sermon.

And notice, nothing in it that isn't in the sermons that you've heard from the time you were so high. He speaks about the Catholicity of the church by that I mean this.

[33 : 10] Peter emphasizes, as I said earlier, that all men are equal before God. And he speaks about how God in his sovereignty has brought men from every culture and every creed into his church from both races, Jew and Gentile.

He is Lord of all. And then he emphasizes this, that God has spoken in his word. The word which God sent unto the children of Israel preaching peace by Jesus Christ.

This is the way in which the gospel is communicated mainly through preaching. Through preaching. If anyone should ever say to you, why should you go to church anyway?

You give them this answer. Because going to church to hear the preaching of the gospel is the means that God has particularly appointed for the blessing of my soul.

And that's a good enough reason for you to come to church. He emphasized that. And then he emphasized this, that the gospel of the world always bears witness to Jesus Christ.

[34 : 25] It always speaks about Jesus. At the very heart of the Christian gospel is this person, Jesus Christ. The gospel reveals Jesus.

Jesus. And that is why the Christian religion is different from every other religion. It is the revelation from God to man of a saviour.

Of a saviour. And then he emphasized the unity of the Bible. You see, the whole Bible is about this. You need the Old Testament and the New Testament.

God, he says, has sent his word unto the children of Israel from the very beginning. And this word, you know, was published throughout all Judea.

God, from the very beginning, has spoken to man. Hence the importance of the Bible. Guard it. Keep it. Read it. Study it. God is always speaking to you.

[35 : 27] Even though you don't always hear him, he's still speaking. And then in that Bible, God is presenting Jesus Christ as the source of man's peace.

peace. He preaches peace by Jesus Christ. And God commands men to believe in Christ that they may have peace.

This is what you've always heard. Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. God was in Christ reconciling the world or making peace with the world through Jesus Christ.

peace available to any who believes. He emphasized the person of Jesus Christ.

God became man, says Peter. This man, this God who became man, came into the world. He ministered. He went about doing good.

[36 : 29] He was crucified. He died in this world and he was raised from the dead in this world.

What's he talking about? He's talking about what theologians would call today the historical Jesus.

That Jesus came and Jesus died and Jesus rose. And he speaks about something else. To him give all the prophets witness. That's the Old Testament and the New.

That through his name whosoever believes in him shall receive remission of sins. What's he saying here? What these apostles always said. They emphasize the exclusiveness of the Christian religion.

Now some of us from time to time get into trouble in the press and the media because we dare to suggest that the Christian religion is exclusive. Well we dare to say it because we stand four square with the apostles and the New Testament on this issue.

There is salvation nowhere else. But through faith in the Christ of God and in the Christ of the Bible. Not in the Christ of this sect or the next sect or the next cult or the next but in the Christ of the Bible alone.

[37 : 46] And that was always the thrust of apostolic preaching. to you says Peter speaking to Cornelius I come with this gospel offering to you as the only source of your salvation Jesus Christ and I command you to believe in him because he says there is salvation in none other.

And here you are tonight and maybe you've said countless times if only I had a vision if only I had a dream if only I could hear a voice if only if only if only if only my friend the means that God has appointed for your salvation is sitting is resting on the rest there in front of you in your seat.

The gospel of his grace presented to you in the Bible. Well there's one other thing surely you need more than that and the answer is yes in a sense you do.

What then do you need other than that? Is the Bible not sufficient? Ah yes the Bible is sufficient but the Bible has to be accompanied by something.

What is it? the power of the Holy Spirit the power of the Holy Spirit and here is what happened in the life and in the this is what happened to Cornelius the Holy Spirit we read here fell on them the Holy Spirit shed light for him on its meaning the Holy Spirit illumined his mind and the Holy Spirit by his power enabled him to believe the Holy Spirit who convicted him of his need was the same Holy Spirit who enabled him to believe this is what the testimony this was the testimony of the church in Jerusalem concerning these Gentiles that God had given to the Gentiles repentance unto life they were changed translated transformed from a life of sin to one which this book sums up in one word repentance unto life faith in

[40 : 28] Christ the power of his presence in their life they saw not only their need of a saviour but they saw and recognised now the saviour whom they needed well now can I close it at that and can I leave it at that by asking you that question as well you may be here tonight and you say to me well I know that I need a saviour I know that well do you know this as well that the saviour who is brought before you yet again in the gospel is yours you see my friend don't you be led into the trap of thinking that it's sufficient for you to say

I need a saviour you have to go a step further than that you have to accept the saviour that the bible brings before you and that is the question as you leave this church night brought into it by the providence of God to hear the gospel one thrusts yet again but remember this you leave it with the same question ringing in your ears have I by the enabling power of the spirit made this saviour mine have you let us pray oh lord give us we pray thee thyself and help us to know that thou art ours and that we are thine we thank thee for the wonderful privilege that thou didst give to those who have been brought to recognize their need and those who whose needs to that extent have been met by the gospel being presented to them oh lord may we know the gospel as the gospel of thy power and thy grace may we know the insufficiency of the human means but the great sufficiency of the power of god using these means to the great end for which they have been given that we might believe in thee help us then oh lord tonight to believe we thank thee for the gospel of thy grace and we pray for its blessing in our own lives forgiving sin for jesus sake amen to honor amen honor for the honor Thank you.