

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 9: 32 – 11:18

No sooner have we finished the story of the conversion of Paul than the story shifts back to Peter. Yet again, we are given a reminder that this is a story which traces the development of the Christian faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than following the career of any particular individual.

We are now moving into the third main section of the book – the gospel spreads to the Gentiles. It begins with Peter exercising an itinerant ministry. We witness two miracles – the healing of Aeneas and the raising to life of Dorcas – two of the ‘minor characters’ in the story of Acts. Their stories remind us that this is not just a book about the megastars of the early church. Dorcas is just a faithful believer who, we are told, ‘filled her life with acts of charity and kindness.’ We never hear of her again. But, we are reassured that God is equally concerned for all believers. Further, both miracles illustrate that the Holy Spirit is at work through Peter’s ministry. But even a raising from the dead is overshadowed by the main event of this period – the conversion of Cornelius.

The key verse from these chapters is Acts 10:34, ***‘I now understand how true it is that God has no favourites.’*** For Peter, this represents a fundamental reappraisal of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Sometimes, we need the grace and humility to say, ‘I was wrong. I now see things differently.’

So there are actually two conversions in this story. Cornelius, the Roman centurion, becomes the first Gentile follower of Jesus, but the conversion of Peter is equally amazing. Peter was converted to a new understanding. Until now, Christianity had been a purely Jewish affair. The call to admit Gentiles to the faith was quite a shocking revelation for Peter, as indeed it was for the church in Jerusalem. Three times in his vision, Peter had to be told that God considered non-Jewish meat to be pure, leading him to go to the house of Cornelius where his ideas of what was acceptable were turned on their head. Having seen the faith of Cornelius, he was lead to pray for him, and his whole household and lead them to faith. Having gone through a total change of mind, every bit as significant as St. Paul’s change of heart, Peter, had no hesitation in preaching the gospel and baptizing Cornemius.

This event is so significant, that it is repeated several times: Cornelius has a vision; Peter has a vision; Peter is told about Cornelius' vision; Peter preaches the gospel; the church in Jerusalem hear that something has happened; Peter repeats his vision; the other believers immediately agree that this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It all seems remarkably straight forward. The section concludes with the words, '**God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.**'(11:18). We hear of no dissenting voices.

The gospel is now open to the entire world. The way is open for its advance 'to the uttermost ends of the earth.'