

Tabitha Raised and the Conversion of Cornelius (Acts 9:26-11:18)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Review from Prior Lesson

- a. In the prior lesson, we studied the account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He is on the road to Damascus on the way to persecute Christians. He encounters a bright light, is struck blind, and hears Jesus speaking directly to him.
- b. After praying and fasting, three days later, Ananias baptizes Paul.
- c. Paul then preaches Christ in Damascus, faces persecution from the Jews, and escapes the city only by being lowered in a basket through the wall at night.
 - i. (Review) Read **Acts 9:20-25**.
- d. The current lesson will begin with the events in Paul's life after his baptism, and then the focus will shift back to Peter's ministry.

II. Saul to Jerusalem, Caesarea and Tarsus

- a. Read **Acts 9:26-31**.
 - i. After leaving Damascus, it says what happened next for Paul.
 1. He went to Jerusalem, where Barnabas brought him to meet the apostles.
 2. After Jews try to kill Saul in Jerusalem, the disciples bring him to Caesarea (on the Mediterranean coast), and from there he is sent to Tarsus (in Cilicia, corresponding to modern southeast Turkey).
- b. While one might get the impression from **Acts 9** that Paul went to Jerusalem very soon after his conversion, we get a different sense from what he says in **Galatians 1** regarding this time of his life.
 - i. Read **Galatians 1:13-19**.
 - ii. Paul says that he went to Arabia and then back to Damascus. Then after three years went to Jerusalem, where he met Peter and James.
 1. It does not say *why* Paul went to Arabia.
 2. Perhaps he went to Arabia to spend time with God in the wilderness, as Jesus did after his baptism (**Matthew 4**)?

Was he on some type of spiritual retreat, to spend time alone with God and to pray? If so, he would be following the footsteps of Moses, who went to Horeb, a/k/a Mount Sinai, Moses (**Exodus 3**), or Elijah after he fled Jezebel (**1 Kings 19**).

- a. No one today knows the reason why Paul went there; this is just a possibility.

III. Peter Heals a Paralytic and Raises Tabitha from the Dead

- a. Read **Acts 9:32-43**.
 - i. Peter heals Aeneas, a paralytic in Lydda.
 - ii. He then raises Tabitha from the dead in Joppa.
 - iii. The result of each miracle is that many in the surrounding areas believe in Jesus and turn to the Lord.
 1. "So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him [*the paralytic man healed by Peter*] and turned to the Lord." (**Acts 9:35**, NKJV)
 2. "And it [*Peter raising Tabitha from the dead*] became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord." (**Acts 9:42**, NKJV)
- b. The pattern of people coming to faith upon seeing miraculous signs performed by the apostles fulfills what Jesus had said at the end of **Mark**.
 - i. Jesus promised that his followers would "lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (**Mark 16:18**)
 - ii. And Mark states that Jesus' followers "...went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and *confirming the word through the accompanying signs*. Amen." (**Mark 16:20**, NKJV)
- c. These signs are also reminiscent of miracles that Jesus had done during His ministry.
- d. A few comments regarding Tabitha.
 - i. Her name "Tabitha" (an Aramaic term), when translated into Greek, is "Dorcas".
 1. Translated into English, that name means *deer* or *gazelle*.
 - ii. Her life provides a great example for us all, but perhaps, especially as a model and inspiration for women.

1. Her life was “full of good works and charitable deeds”. (**Acts 9:36**)
 - a. In the King James Version it says, “good works and almsdeeds”.
2. The widows, weeping, show Peter all the tunics and garments she had made for them.
 - a. I assume this was not to show off what a good seamstress she was; but rather to demonstrate how generous and caring she had been toward the widows.
 - b. This reminds me of the kind of women who are held up by Paul as being worthy of entering the select group of widows, essentially a religious order within the church. Paul said those women should be:
 - i. “...well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.” (**1 Timothy 5:10**, NKJV)
 - c. Note that Paul is looking for women possessing the heart of caring, hard-working servants. He is not looking for the kind of things many churches look for today in women. Churches are often seeking to raise up female spiritual leaders who are well-spoken, charismatic, educated, successful, or who have other skills held up by the world. This calls to mind what Jesus had said:
 - i. “...For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” (**Luke 16:15**, NKJV)
 - ii. God’s values are very different from those of the world. Godly churches will reflect the counter-cultural values of God rather than the things of this world in all areas, including how we view women within the church. Let us look to Tabitha as the example of a model Christian woman.
3. Cyprian, bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa, pointed to her as a great example of how important it is to give

alms and to meet the needs of the poor. From Cyprian, writing c. 250 AD:

- a. “In the **Acts of the Apostles** the faith of the fact is established; and that souls are delivered by almsgiving not only from the second, but from the first death, is discovered by the evidence of a matter accomplished and completed. When Tabitha, being greatly given to good works and to bestowing alms, fell sick and died, Peter was summoned to her lifeless body; and when he, with apostolic humanity, had come in haste, there stood around him widows weeping and entreating, showing the cloaks, and coats, and all the garments which they had previously received, and praying for the deceased not by their words, but by her own deeds.
- b. “Peter felt that what was asked in such a way might be obtained, and that Christ’s aid would not be wanting to the petitioners, since He Himself was clothed in the clothing of the widows. When, therefore, falling on his knees, he had prayed, and—fit advocate for the widows and poor—had brought to the Lord the prayers entrusted to him, turning to the body, which was now lying washed on the bier, he said, ‘Tabitha, in the name of Jesus Christ, arise!’ (**Acts 9:40**) Nor did He fail to bring aid to Peter, who had said in the gospel, that whatever should be asked in His name should be given.
- c. “Therefore, death is suspended and the spirit is restored, and to the marvel and astonishment of all, the revived body is quickened into this worldly light once more; so effectual were the merits of mercy, so much did righteous works avail! She who had conferred upon suffering widows the help needful to live, deserved to be recalled to life by the widows’ petition.”
- d. (Source: Cyprian, Treatise No. 8: On Works and Alms, found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 5, p. 477)
- e. Peter performs this miracle in the coastal town of Joppa and stays there at the home of Simon the tanner. This sets the stage for Peter’s next encounter.

IV. The Conversion of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion

- a. Introduction to Cornelius.
 - i. Read **Acts 10:1-8**.
 - ii. Read **Acts 10:22**.
 - iii. Read **Acts 10:30-31**.
- b. The amazing character of Cornelius. He is described as:
 - i. Devout
 - ii. Feared God, with all his household
 1. Not only was Cornelius a godly man personally. He also had a positive spiritual impact on his entire household.
 - iii. Gave alms generously to the people
 - iv. Prayed to God always.
 - v. Fasting at the time the angel appears. (**Acts 10:30-31**)
 - vi. A “*just* man” (NKJV); in the New American Standard Bible, “a *righteous* and god-fearing man”. (**Acts 10:22**)
 - vii. Having a good reputation among the Jews.
 - viii. God heard his prayers and remembered his alms; they came up as a “memorial offering” before the Lord.
- c. It should be no wonder to us why God sent an angel to Cornelius and chose him to be one who would pave the way for all the future uncircumcised Gentile Christians. Cornelius was a man of extraordinary spiritual character.
- d. The passages we have just read, describing the character of Cornelius before he became a Christian, single-handedly demolishes ‘Reformation Theology’: the entire foundation of Calvinism, as well as much of what Luther taught.
 - i. Calvinism is, to me, like dandelions in a lawn. No matter how many times one might try to get rid of dandelions (perhaps short of chemical warfare), they manage to come back. They seem to be everywhere.
 - ii. The foundation of Calvinist doctrine is the idea that after the Fall of Adam, all men thereafter were *totally depraved* and could do nothing good. While there are many examples in Scripture that could be used to disprove this assertion, Cornelius provides one of the best.

- e. Regarding the impact of what Martin Luther taught, consider an article by Rev. Matthew Harrison, president of the Lutheran Witness:
- i. “The Lutheran Reformation began when the Lord God Himself, through the Scriptures, opened Luther’s mind to the scriptural distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The Law makes demands, which we could not, cannot and never will fulfill. “No one is righteous, no not one” (**Rom. 3:10**). “Even our righteous deeds are as filthy rags” (**Isaiah 64:6**). “The wages of sin is death” (**Rom. 6:23**).
 - ii. “If St. Paul laments about himself, “The good that I would do I do not do” (**Rom. 7:19**), where does that leave you? You have not a thought, an action or any of your physical, psychological or spiritual being that is not affected by and tainted by the reality of sin. And sin damns.
 - iii. “The Gospel, however, makes no demands and even gives the faith needed to believe it (**Eph. 2:8-9**).”
 1. (Source of the above quote:
<https://witness.lcms.org/2014/back-to-basics-law-and-gospel/>)
- f. **Question:** Did God view the almsgiving of Cornelius and his other righteous acts as “filthy rags”, something disgusting and to be rejected?
- i. **Answer:** Of course not. That passage from **Isaiah 64:6** was taken out of context by Luther. The people Isaiah was addressing were unrighteous, and the Lord, therefore, rejected their offerings. God is pleased with those who are righteous and who offer sacrifices with a sincere heart, including giving to the poor.
- g. Regarding the teachings of Calvinism.
- i. Calvin created a theological system that is logically consistent, but completely wrong. The foundation upon which the entire system is created is the idea that after the Fall of Adam and Eve in **Genesis 3**, man became totally depraved.
 - ii. After the Fall, according to Calvin, man became totally evil in his nature, completely incapable of doing anything good. He cannot even seek God. Therefore, all good must be done solely and unilaterally by the action of God.
 - iii. The five cardinal points of Calvinist theology (often summarized by the acronym “TULIP”) flow logically from the false foundational assumption of total depravity. The five points of classical ‘Tulip theology’ Calvinism are:

1. Total Depravity (We are incapable of doing anything good after the Fall; man became totally corrupt.)
 2. Unconditional Election (God arbitrarily chooses who he wants to save and who he wants to condemn to hellfire. We have nothing to do with where we end up.)
 3. Limited Atonement (Christ died only for the elect, not for everyone.)
 4. Irresistible Grace (If God chooses to save you, you can't resist that.)
 5. Perseverance of the Saints (Once someone becomes a Christian, they cannot lose their salvation, *regardless of what they do* afterward. This is sometimes described by the phrase "once saved, always saved".)
- iv. The classic verse Protestants use to support the false doctrine of "total depravity" is **Romans 3**.
1. Read **Romans 3:10-18**.
 - a. This is a verse often used by Protestants in their attempt to share the gospel, taking it out of context to try to prove that all people are totally wicked (there is nothing whatever good in people before they come to Christ).
 2. Now try to apply how Protestants apply this verse to *the life of Cornelius* as we just read from **Acts 10**.
 - a. "There is none righteous, no, not one" (**Romans 3:10**, quoting from David in **Psalms 14**)
 - i. However, Paul uses the same Greek word in **Romans 3:10** (dikaios / δίκαιος) here that Luke uses when he speaks of Cornelius as "a *righteous* (just) and god-fearing man". (**Acts 10:22**)
 - b. "No one who seeks God" (**Romans 3:11**)
 - i. However, compare that to: "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that *He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*" (**Hebrews 11:6**, NKJV)

- ii. Clearly, Cornelius was a man who was seeking God!
 - c. “No one who does good” (**Romans 3:12**)
 - i. However, Peter preaches to the household of Cornelius: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and *works righteousness* is accepted by Him.” (**Acts 10:34–35**, NKJV)
 - ii. Cornelius is giving alms to the poor and has a good reputation among the Jews.
 - d. “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (**Romans 3:18**)
 - i. In contrast, consider the description of Cornelius as being “... a devout man and *one who feared God with all his household*... (**Acts 10:1–2**, NKJV)
3. Jesus spoke of there being people before Him who were righteous.
- a. “...that on you may come *all the righteous blood shed on the earth*, from the blood of *righteous Abel* to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” (**Matthew 23:35**, NKJV)
 - b. **Question:** Where is all this “righteous blood” that Jesus speaks of coming from, if there have been no righteous men or women?
4. While the righteous men and women of the past were few in number (and often heavily persecuted), they did exist. The Bible speaks a great deal about them. Noah, Lot, Job and others certainly were not “totally depraved”.
5. Read **Psalm 34:7-23**.
- a. There indeed have been men and women who are righteous, who fear God, and who seek Him.
 - b. He has always heard these righteous people when they have cried out to Him.
 - c. Cornelius was one of the righteous ones spoken of in the Scriptures. Let us strive to be like him and to be

used by God to reach others who have similar good hearts.

- d. Let us reject the false gospel message that may *sound so humble*; however, it does not match what we find in the Scriptures. That message: “we are all wretches...it is a good thing we don’t have to actually live righteous lives, rather but are saved by God just choosing us and covering up our rotten lives with the spotless life of Christ.”
 - i. This was *not* the gospel message preached by Jesus, Peter and Paul.
- e. Let us keep our eyes on
 - i. the example of Cornelius and
 - ii. the gospel message that Peter preached to him and his household.

h. Prayer, Fasting and Alms

- i. The account of Cornelius speaks of him praying, fasting, and giving alms to the poor before he became a Christian. Recall that in **Matthew 6**, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses *all three* of these spiritual practices, in order.
 1. **Matthew 6:1** “When you *do your charitable deeds...*”
 2. **Matthew 6:5** “When you *pray...*”
 3. **Matthew 6:16** “When you *fast...*”
- ii. Note that Jesus does not say IF you pray, fast and give alms; He says WHEN you do those things. He assumes that these spiritual practices will be manifested in the lives of His disciples.
- iii. The life of Cornelius included devotion to all three, even before he became a Christian.
 1. **Challenge:** What about you? Are you devoted to all three (prayer, fasting and giving to the poor) as an integral part of your own spiritual walk with God?
- iv. In the quote from Cyprian we read earlier, from his treatise on the importance of including giving alms and doing good works, right before he wrote about Tabitha’s example, he discussed what the angel said in **Tobit** regarding prayer and almsgiving.

1. The **Book of Tobit** is included in the *Apocrypha*, which is also referred to as the *Deuterocanonical books*.
 - a. These books were respected as part of the Scriptures in the early church; and have been retained in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.
 - b. Also, they were included in the original (1611) King James Version of the Bible and were not removed from most KJV Bibles until the late 1800s or early 1900s.

2. Read **Tobit 12:1-10**.
 - a. Prayer is good with fasting, almsgiving and righteousness.
 - i. To me, Cornelius is the 'poster child' who exemplified this!
 - b. A few prayers with righteousness are better than many with wrongdoing.
 - i. This reminds me of what David said in **Psalm 34**, and what James said regarding the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man availing much. (**James 5:16**)
 - c. There are clearly some things in this passage from **Tobit** that could upset someone influenced by Reformation theology. However, I believe these principles are consistent with what Jesus taught in the gospels, including the story of the Sheep and the Goats at the end of **Matthew 23**, regarding the basis for the Final Judgment.
 - i. Some may find these statements regarding the importance of righteousness, good works and almsgiving to be disturbing, in light of what you were taught in the past. If that is the case, please wrestle with these things with an open Bible!

V. Peter Responds to the Call

- a. Read **Acts 10:9-33**.
 - i. Special hours of prayer.

1. Cornelius was praying and fasting at the ninth hour (= 3 pm).

- a. Note that the designation of hours of the day was based on the day beginning at sunrise, about 6 am.
2. Peter goes up on the roof to pray at about the sixth hour (= noon).
3. The traditional Christian practice of praying three times per day corresponded to the hours marking the crucifixion.
 - a. The crucifixion of Jesus started at the third hour, about 9 am.
 - b. At the sixth hour, noon, the midpoint of the crucifixion of Jesus, the sun turned dark.
 - c. Jesus expired at the ninth hour, which is 3 pm.
4. **Challenge:** Some in our fellowship began putting this into practice after our lesson on **Acts 2**, at least stopping to pray the Lord's prayer at the various hours of prayer. How is that going?
- b. Peter has a vision of the sheet descending from heaven, containing various unclean animals.
 - i. Peter had been keeping the Levitical dietary laws contained in **Leviticus 11** and elsewhere in the Law of Moses.
 - ii. Jews would not eat with uncircumcised Gentiles (unclean).
 - iii. Peter understands this as a sign from God to respond to the invitation from the Gentile men sent from Cornelius.
 1. The Spirit tells Peter to go with the three men.
 2. The next day he departs Joppa, with some other Christians accompanying him to Caesarea.
 - iv. Cornelius is the first clear-cut example of an uncircumcised Gentile (God-fearing but clearly not a convert to Judaism) to receive the gospel.

VI. Peter Preaches

- a. Read **Acts 10:34-48**.
 - i. "Whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by Him." (**Acts 10:35**)

1. Peter must not have read Luther or Calvin. Clearly, he did not understand the 'Romans Road' message of how to share the gospel message!
- ii. Satan is mentioned in the gospel message presentation.
 1. "... [Jesus] went about doing good healing all who were oppressed by the devil..." (**Acts 10:38**)
- iii. Referring to the death of Jesus, Peter says, in effect, "*They* killed him" (pointing to the Jews in Jerusalem).
 1. Contrast this with what Peter said to the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**: "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ." (**Acts 2:36**, NKJV)
 2. In the past, I have heard people try to tie the statement "Jesus, *whom you crucified...*" statement in **Acts 2:36** to attempt to prove that everyone today is guilty of the crime of murdering Jesus (as opposed to Him dying to rescue or save us).
 3. However, based on what Peter said to Cornelius in **Acts 10**, that is not how the apostle Peter meant it.
 - a. I believe that the overwhelming thing we should feel when we look at the cross is love and appreciation for what Jesus was willing to do for us, rather than guilt for murdering him.
- iv. The gospel message preached by Peter to the household of Cornelius:
 1. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, including eye-witness accounts to the resurrection.
 2. Jesus came to heal all who were oppressed by the devil.
 3. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
 4. These things were all in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.
 - a. "*To Him all the prophets witness* that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." (**Acts 10:43**, NKJV)
 - b. Note that here Peter was speaking to Gentiles rather than to Jews; however, he *still* points to Old Testament prophecies!

- b. The Holy Spirit unexpectedly falls on the Gentiles of Cornelius' household, while Peter is preaching to them.
 - i. Miraculous signs, speaking in tongues.
 - ii. Peter's response after seeing this sign from God: he commands that they be baptized in the name of the Lord.

VII. Aftermath and Recap

- a. Read **Acts 11:1-18**.
- b. **Question:** Why did the Spirit fall on the Gentiles before they were baptized?
 - i. Peter said, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, *as upon us at the beginning.*" (**Acts 11:15**, NKJV)
 - 1. This reference to "in the beginning" refers to what happened at the beginning of the church, in **Acts 2**.
 - 2. The outpouring of the Spirit in **Acts 2** had been prophesied by Jesus prior to His ascension, in **Acts 1**.
 - a. Jesus had told the apostles, "for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (**Acts 1:5**, NKJV)
 - 3. Peter takes it as a sign from God that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first.
- c. **Question:** Why did they have to get baptized in water if they already had the Holy Spirit poured out on them?
 - i. Recall what Peter had said on the Day of Pentecost, in **Acts 2**.
 - 1. "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For *the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.*'" (**Acts 2:38-39**, NKJV)
 - 2. For all who become Christians, water baptism leads to the promise of two things (among others):
 - a. remission of sins, and
 - b. receiving the Holy Spirit.

- i. The receipt of the Holy Spirit is a promise given to all who have faith in Jesus, repent of their sins, and are baptized.
 - ii. I believe that this promise (which applies to all of us) refers to the *indwelling of the Holy Spirit*.
 - 1. Jesus had told the apostles: “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you *and will be in you.*” (**John 14:16–17**, NKJV)
 - 2. Paul reminded the Corinthians: “Or do you not know that *your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you*, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?” (**1 Corinthians 6:19**, NKJV)
 - 3. Again, from Paul: “...For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: *‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’*” (**2 Corinthians 6:16**, NKJV)
 - ii. The “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit happened spontaneously and unexpectedly in **Acts 2** (upon the Jewish apostles) and in **Acts 10** (upon the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household). It was highly unusual and certainly did not happen to all Christians.
 - iii. The spontaneous outpouring of the Spirit upon these Gentiles was confirmation of what the Lord conveyed to Cornelius in the vision of the sheet lowered from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals (including unclean ones): uncircumcised Gentiles could become Christians. Therefore, after seeing the Spirit poured out, Peter directed that they be baptized.
- d. Side issue: infant baptism
- i. Some argue that baptizing infants is appropriate given the phrase, “all his household” (**Acts 10:2**)
 - 1. I have heard people try to use this account of the household of Cornelius to justify the baptism of infants and small children. They imagine that Cornelius must have had small children.

Therefore, they reason that if his “whole household” was baptized, there likely were infants or other small children who were baptized, as well.

2. However, that line of reasoning is essentially ‘making an argument from silence’, since *the Bible says nothing* regarding whether Cornelius had children or what their ages might have been.
 - ii. Also, consider what Peter said to Cornelius and his household.
 1. “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, *whoever believes in Him* will receive remission of sins.” (**Acts 10:43**, NKJV)
 2. If it is necessary for someone to believe in Jesus to have their sins forgiven, that would seem to rule out the idea that infants and small children (those too young to believe in Jesus) can be candidates for baptism.
 - e. Another side issue: involvement in military affairs and war
 - i. Some argue that since Cornelius was a centurion, a military official in the Roman army, that it is okay for Christians to join the military and go to war.
 - ii. However, since we do not know specifically what Cornelius did regarding his military responsibilities before or after his conversion, this is an argument from silence.
 - iii. What we do know is that Jesus commanded His followers to love their enemies, not to kill them!
 - iv. For those who are interested in how the early Christians understood the teachings of Jesus and the apostles regarding war and military involvement, I encourage you to consider an audio message by David Bercot, *What the Early Christians Believed About War*. That message is available from Scroll Publishing or through the Scroll Publishing YouTube channel.