

Welcoming Others in Christ

Devotional Reading: Colossians 3:1–11

Background Scripture: Ruth 1:1–18; John 4:5–10; Acts 10:1–11:18

Today's Scripture: Acts 10:9–15, 30–35

I. Extraordinary Vision

Acts 10:9–15

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

9. The word *they* refers to a group of three men sent from Cornelius to find Peter and bring him back to Caesarea (Acts 10:7–8). The journey took the men a little less than a day. They came near *the city of Joppa* at midday.

The author notes that simultaneous to the group approaching their destination, Peter *went up* to the roof of Simon's house *to pray*. The roofs of this period were typically flat and functioned almost like an

extra room. Tenants commonly used them for storage, worship, and socializing, especially during hot summer days.

10. Peter, ready for his midday meal, becomes *hungry*. His hosts begin to prepare food. Before refrigeration, most dishes had to be freshly made, so Peter's appetite had time to grow during the preparations. While he waits, Peter falls into a *trance*. This state is separate from his hunger.

11. In the trance, Peter experiences a vision. He sees *heaven opened*. In the first century, people associated the sky with the dwelling place of God. Seeing it “opened” suggests God's presence and power (compare Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13 and Stephen's vision in Acts 7:56).

The text lets us “see” the vision from Peter's perspective. At first, he watches a mysterious *something* descend from the sky. It is *like a large sheet* lowered by its *four corners*. Sheets in the ancient world were made of linen and provided shade or covered people while sleeping.

12. The sheet's contents, a collection of live animals, surely surprise Peter. Our text's mention of *all kinds* of creatures may reflect the wording of the creation account. The animals on the sheet include all kinds of *four-footed animals* like livestock, as well as *reptiles* and *birds*. While the text does not name any specific species, the collec-

tion includes animals that were “unclean” according to the Law of Moses.

13. Peter’s vision continues as a *voice* commands him to slaughter the animals for a meal. This command comes as a shock to the apostle. While the Law of Moses acknowledges that God created all creatures as “good” (Genesis 1:25), it also lays out clear instructions regarding which animals are appropriate for food. Animals like cows and sheep are considered clean. Other animals, such as lizards and rats, are deemed unclean. Certain types of birds are also unclean. Eating, and in some cases even touching, an unclean animal is forbidden for observant Jews.

If an animal species was named “unclean,” it did not necessarily mean it was physically dirty or that it was somehow more “sinful” than other animals. It can be helpful to think of “cleanness” as a visible representation of God’s unique holiness. A person had to be clean (pure) to approach God’s holy spaces or participate in corporate worship.

14. Peter understands that the *voice* in verse 13 is God’s voice, so he addresses him as *Lord*. Peter’s response confirms that at least some of the animals on the sheet are *unclean*. The apostle strongly protests that he has never *eaten anything* that would violate the Law of Moses. The Old Testament depicts Jews’ refusal to eat unclean food as an act of faithfulness.

The word translated *impure* here is translated “defiled” in Mark 7:2 and “unholy” in Hebrews 10:29. In this case, it reflects the sense of something outside of God’s boundaries for his people.

15. *The voice* of the Lord responds to Peter with a final word. Despite Peter’s reservations, *God* is the one who decides what or who is unclean. If God chooses, he can designate something as cleansed that was previously declared *impure*. This statement is consistent with Jesus’ asser-

tion that “all foods” are “clean” since the accurate measure of cleanness is based on a person’s heart (Mark 7:19).

Further, God’s words remind us of his promise to create a new, cleansed people for himself, who are willing and able to live out his commands. Under this new covenant, God’s holy people are not distinguished by a diet or a set of practices. Instead, they are marked by a complete inward transformation.

II. Eminent Visitors Acts 10:30–35

³⁰ **Cornelius answered:** “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

³⁴ **Then Peter began to speak:** “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

30. The men from Caesarea bring Peter to *Cornelius*. He receives the apostle enthusiastically and recounts his experience from Acts 10:3–6. This verse catches Cornelius *praying at three in the afternoon*. Regular afternoon prayers were a common practice for both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. The book of Acts specifically calls three in the afternoon “the time of prayer” (Acts 3:1). During Cornelius’ prayer, a man dressed *in shining clothes* appears, whom Cornelius recognizes as an angel.

31. *Cornelius* doesn't share his prayer request. Whatever his *prayer*, the angel tells him it was *heard*. That is, the Lord acknowledged *Cornelius'* words and was ready to give him an answer.

Gifts refers to money given for the relief of those experiencing poverty. The angel tells *Cornelius* that God sees and remembers the care he's given the needy. God calls his people to hold concern for the poor and to give generously.

32. The angel gives instructions: *Cornelius* is to *send* for *Peter*. Then he provides the ancient equivalent of an address. *Simon* is a *tanner*. Tanners made their living by curing animal skins in stinky liquid to turn them into leather. We can, therefore, deduce that *Simon's* family lived on the outskirts of town, where *sea* breezes might carry the smells away. Presumably, *Peter* would be easy to find. The angel implies that *Peter* has an essential message for *Cornelius*.

33. *Cornelius*, a Roman centurion, was a man of action and authority. He wasted no time in sending for *Peter*. In the meantime, he gathered the members of his household, who were also God-fearing Gentiles, to hear what the man of God had to say.

34. Although *Peter* initially struggles to understand the vision he saw, *Cornelius's* story helps him grasp its significance. God's command to not call anything "impure" is not about unclean food, but about people—specifically the Gentiles. *Peter's* resulting conclusion, which he shares with *Cornelius*, changes the course of the church forever.

Firstly, *Peter* declares that *God does not show favoritism*. This saying means that God does not hold preference toward or partiality for any one people group over any others. While such words surprised a first-century Jewish audience, this theme runs throughout the Old Testament.

35. Secondly, *Peter* concludes that membership in the people of God is not limited to any one *nation* or ethnicity. Instead, every person who reveres the Lord and lives by faith, doing *what is right*, finds acceptance as one of his people. Acceptance was joyous news for *Cornelius* and his family. *Peter* boldly declares God's inclusion of them in God's plan for repentance and salvation!

III. Equal Value Galatians 3:28–29

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

28. Roughly 20 years after *Peter* met *Cornelius*, the apostle *Paul* revisits the theme of Gentile inclusion in his letter to the Galatians. Some members of the Galatian church taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised to receive salvation. *Paul*, however, argues that faith in *Jesus* grants full status as a member of God's family. In the above verse, he teaches that all distinctions between people groups disappear when viewed through the lens of salvation in *Christ Jesus*.

29. Being a descendant of *Abraham*, or of *Abraham's seed*, was a vital self-identifier for Jews in the first century. *Paul* accepts this identification and then includes Gentiles in it. They, too, are *heirs* of the promise given to the patriarch. This status comes through *Christ* as the "seed" (Galatians 3:16) and our "adoption to sonship" (4:5; Romans 8:15–17). As children of God, we inherit all of God's promises. While *Paul's* opponents thought of Abrahamic heritage in a biological sense, *Paul* speaks of it spiritually. Through faith in *Jesus*, *Abraham's* blessing includes people of all backgrounds.

Involvement Learning

Welcoming Others in Christ

Into the Lesson

Think about a time you held a preconceived notion about someone or something that turned out to be completely wrong. How did you recognize it was incorrect?

Today we are exploring the story of Peter and Cornelius. In it, God challenges their preconceived notions and reveals a new understanding of his plan for salvation.

Into the Word

Read Acts 10:9–15, 30–35. What historical and cultural barriers existed between the Jews and Gentiles during the first century? Refer to Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 15:4–11.

How does the Holy Spirit play a role in breaking down barriers between people?

What are some modern barriers that divide people?

How can Christians be agents of reconciliation and unity?

Read Galatians 3:28–29. How might we live out the principles of Galatians 3:28–29 in our daily lives?

Key Text

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
—Galatians 3:28

Into Life

All believers, regardless of their background, are equal before God and united as one body. List some ways you can promote unity among believers. Consider the following ideas:

- Organize a meal where people may share stories and experiences.
- Start a book club to discuss books that address diversity.
- Arrange a community-wide Bible study.
- Collaborate on community service initiatives to foster a sense of shared purpose.
- Invite experts or community leaders to share their experiences of unity and division.
- Participate in a church or community collaborative event to foster relationships.

Thought to Remember

Christ's salvation is available to all people without distinction.
