

Book Study #9

ACTS

Acts 10:1-48

Peter's Vision

A Muslim doesn't consider it impolite to go into the kitchen of non-Muslim hosts to make sure milk and meat are not mixed in the meal preparations. So strong is our commitment to ethnic distinctives of diet, especially when they are grounded in religion. We do not readily leave the comfort zone of our religio-ethnic identity. But if Peter is to spearhead the Jerusalem church's Gentile mission, God must move him out of his Jewish comfort zone. A Culinary Vision (10:9-16)

Luke dovetails the actions of Cornelius's messengers with those of Peter. *About noon* (literally, the sixth hour, with daylight hours reckoned from six a.m.) on the following day, as they are *approaching the city*, Peter climbs, probably via an outside stairway, to the flat rooftop of Simon the tanner's house. His purpose is prayer, according to the pattern of pious Jews who prayed three times a day, though this was not necessarily one of the officially prescribed times (Ps 55:17). The rooftop provides solitude, possibly an awning for shade, and the refreshment of breezes off the Mediterranean.

During his prayers Peter becomes very hungry. As the meal is being prepared (the normal Jewish pattern was a light meal in the forenoon and the main meal about sunset, so this was not a regular meal), *a trance* comes on him. It is not a dream, nor does Peter lose control of his senses. Rather, the presence of the Lord so comes upon him that he is in a profound state of concentration. He is partially or completely oblivious to external sensations but fully alert to subjective influences as God communicates with him visually and audibly. Commentators have suggested that Peter's hunger, his thoughts of conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the churches of the coastal plain, and the flapping of the awning or the sight of ships in full sail on the Mediterranean are psychological influences on the vision's details. Luke, however, speaks only of Peter's hunger. What we do learn from this narrative's setting is that God is again taking the initiative to bring Peter and the Gentiles together.

Peter sees heaven opened and a "vessel" or "container" (NIV's *something* is too general) like a "linen sheet" (in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.2 the word refers to a ship's sails) being *let down . . . by its four corners*. The four corners probably refer to the worldwide dimensions of the vision's significance ("four corners of the earth," Rev 7:1).

The categories of animals it contains do correspond to a comprehensive Old Testament cataloging of the animal kingdom on land and in the air (Gen 1:24; 7:14; 8:19; Lev 11). Whether *all kinds* indicates that the assemblage includes both clean and unclean animals or just the unclean is not clear. Peter's protest at the command to *kill and eat* indicates that at least some unclean animals are present. The vision's purpose--improving a new freedom in association of Jew and Gentile--is best accomplished if a mixture is present. Peter is commanded to slaughter these animals according to the proper method and eat (Deut 12:15-16). Luke lets us know this mandated behavior change is from God by showing a rare free intercourse between heaven and earth (compare 1:10-11; 2:2; 7:55-56) and a direct voice from heaven (Lk 3:22; 9:35; Acts 9:4, 7; compare 7:31). Divine revelation is required if Old Testament revelation and the layers of ethnic prejudices built upon it are to be set aside.

In the strongest possible terms and appealing to Ezekiel 4:14, Peter faces what he may view as a temptation or test of loyalty. He refuses, announcing his firm resolve to live in ritual purity (compare Mt 16:22; Lk 22:33): *I have never eaten anything impure or unclean* (Lev 10:10; 11:1-47; Deut 14:3-21). That is, I have never eaten anything that is accessible to every human being (NIV *impure*, literally

"common") but by divine mandate is forbidden to me as part of God's holy people. Such food is *unclean*, not only because God declares it to be such but also because if I eat it I will become ritually defiled, unfit to come into God's presence in worship.

The voice comes again, this time providing the rationale: God has declared all foods clean. Peter is not to go on declaring some foods profane or "common." Jesus' teaching and behavior had certainly prepared the way for such a declaration (Mk 7:14-23; Lk 11:39-41), and the cross was the salvific basis for it (Eph 2:14-15; Col 2:14). The sheet from heaven and the voice both bear witness that all God's creatures are now to be viewed as clean and good, not to be refused (Gen 1:31; 1 Tim 4:3).

This whole transaction occurs three times. What is the basic truth here? It is divine mandate, not something inherent in the creature, that establishes the dividing line between clean and unclean. Divinely Sent Gentile Guests (10:17-23)

Peter is thoroughly perplexed (NIV's *wondering about* is too weak; compare 2:12; 5:24; Lk 9:7). Is he confused by an evident divine contradiction, a heavenly voice commanding him to disregard food laws that God had given Moses for Israel? Or is he wondering what significance this boundary abolition will have for his identity and behavior as a Jewish Christian?

By providential coincidence, Cornelius's men appear at the gate and call out for Peter just as he is puzzling over the vision. God the Holy Spirit speaks to Peter, telling him that three men are seeking him (compare v. 21). In describing their pursuit of Peter who will tell them how to be saved (11:14), is Luke presenting a model of the spiritual stance every Gentile should take (17:27; compare Rom 2:7)?

Peter is to go with them without making a distinction for himself (NIV *do not hesitate*; Greek *diakrino*). In the middle or passive voice this verb can mean either "to take issue with" or "to be at odds with oneself, to doubt, to waver, to have misgivings" and is so understood here by many. But since Peter's objections are really based on continuing prejudicial distinctions between Jew and Gentile, and the vision as he comes to properly interpret it has to do with removing such distinctions (v. 28), it seems best to take the verb here in an intensified form of its active meaning, "to make a distinction, to differentiate" (compare 11:12; 15:9). So taken, the Spirit's instruction is Peter's focal point of illumination concerning the vision. If he will act out "not making distinctions" with these Gentiles even to the extent of table fellowship in their household, he will understand the vision and its implications. And today if we would understand God's Word, especially where it challenges our prejudices, we too must wrestle with its meaning and its implications. We may expect to understand it more and more fully as we obey it more and more readily.

Peter meets the men with a declaration that he is the one they are "looking for." He asks why they have come. Placing Cornelius in the most favorable light possible, the messengers describe their master's character, his reputation among *all the Jewish people* (compare Lk 7:5) and the angel's instruction.

Peter invites the men in to be his guests. In this he does not go beyond what a law-abiding Jew might do. Still, because of their visit's purpose, Peter's hospitality is a sign that he agrees to their request, which was not permitted for a Jew. Peter in this brief encounter grows in his discipleship. Obedience to the Spirit will lead to understanding. Understanding demands further obedience.

God by his word was breaking down prejudicial barriers as his witnesses obeyed. What breakthroughs does God want to bring about through us as we obey?