

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 3c

Cornelius' Conversion and Its Aftermath

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In this segment, we are looking at the aftermath of the conversion of Cornelius, his relatives, and his close friends. They have been baptized. Peter actually stays at the home of Cornelius for several days. And so with all of that in mind, we look at chapter 11. It tells us, "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'" So Peter runs into an accusatory atmosphere, at least on the part of some. You have a party within the body of believers at Jerusalem and they are termed here by Luke "the circumcision party." And the criticism is "You went to uncircumcised men. You ate with them." They know that he spent time with them.

So Peter has to explain to them. Verse 4, "But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction.'"

So basically, what's happening here is Peter is giving them a rundown of what happened. "These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered this man's house." Of course, the six men would be from Joppa. So Peter goes to Jerusalem. Why are these men from Joppa with him? We're not told in the text, but one can almost imagine that they go with him to provide a support, so that he's not there all by himself responding to accusations that he associated with uncircumcised men. Theologically, it must be noted that even the little that we have read, in particular, the accusation of the circumcision party, tells us a great deal about how believers at this early stage of the church's history are living out the gospel. They are still subjected, at least some of them are, to the strictures of Judaism. No association with uncircumcised men. No association with Gentiles, in other words, because they are not Jewish. And in fact, historically, we know that there were some segments of Judaism that did not consider Gentiles to be worthy of eternal life. So you have all of those dynamics taking place within Palestinian Judaism.

And so Peter has a challenge ahead of him here. So he is giving them a running description of what happened. And these six brothers who are from Joppa, again, I want to direct you to chapter 10 and verse 23, starting from the second clause. It says, "The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him," which is why we're saying, I'm saying, in chapter 11 that the six brothers that are referenced in 11:12 are probably these individuals from Joppa. So they entered the man's house. Verse 13, "And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?'"

So Peter puts it to them rhetorically. He says, "The Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If that happened to us and now it happened to these individuals, these Gentiles, how could I stand in God's way?" as in "How could I stand in God's way by not baptizing them?" Because up to this point in the Acts narrative, conversion, the falling upon a group of individuals by the Holy Spirit and the subsequent indwelling is always followed closely by baptism. It's happened in the prior contexts. Conversion, indwelling, baptism. They all occur very closely. They're very proximate to one another. And so Peter is saying, "The Holy Spirit fell on these folks. What did you guys want me to do, not baptize them?" It would have been unthinkable. And so they have to acquiesce, and that's what we read about in the next verse. Verse 18, "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

So they couldn't argue with him. They did glorify God and they acknowledged that God had granted repentance to them, to uncircumcised Gentiles, no less. It is an initial acquiescence. That acquiescence will not hold, and we will see that play out in the next unit that we will deal with. Not the next segment, but the next unit. What follows this particular package, we will be dealing with some of that. But for now, they acquiesce because it's Peter. He heard from the Lord. He has authority in the community, so they believe it. But it's not the end of the story. The significance of what Peter was privy to, what Peter had a hand in at the word of the Lord and at the prompting of the Lord, the significance lies in this: that Peter is an apostle, and he just by going to the home of Cornelius, by preaching the gospel, by watching the Holy Spirit fall on these Gentiles so that they spoke in tongues and glorified God. What Peter did by preaching the gospel to them was he effectively utilized, made use of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

So I want to direct you to a passage in the gospels. We're going to go to the gospel of Matthew and I want to show you. It will be Matthew 16. I want to show you the significance of this. We're going to begin reading in verse 13 of Matthew 16. It says, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him (verse 17), 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.'" That "you" there in verse 19, "I will give you," is singular. So Jesus says to Peter, "I will give you (future) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth..." That "you" there is plural. "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth (plural) shall be loosed in heaven."

So Peter, being the one that leads, he is the one who denies Jesus. Jesus is resurrected. The Gospel of John in chapter 21 shows us Peter being restored and Jesus saying directly to Peter, "Feed my sheep." So Peter is a first among equals with respect to the apostles. So he has the keys of the kingdom of heaven. That key is the proclamation of the gospel. And he does that here. Going back to the Book of Acts, he does that here to the household of Cornelius. He preaches the gospel to uncircumcised Gentiles, thereby unlocking the blessings of the kingdom of heaven and having that kingdom manifested in their hearts through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, so that these uncircumcised Gentiles speak with other tongues, other languages, and glorify God. Thereby, Peter is compelled to

baptize them and he has to explain this to the audience in Jerusalem. So Peter, again, the significance of this reading in 11:1-18 is that Peter has just utilized, he's just used that key that Jesus gave him, having been restored, having been indwelt at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit. We will look at the ramifications of that in the next segment.