

November 28 Lesson 13 (NIV)

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Acts 10:34–47

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 10:34–47

ACTS 10:34–47

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. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

KEY TEXT

Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”—Acts 10:34–35

CELEBRATING GOD

Unit 3: Visions of Praise

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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- I. Peter's Message (Acts 10:34–43)
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HOW TO SAY IT

Caesarea Maritima *Sess-uh-ree-uh Mar-uh-tee-muh.*

centurions *en-ture-ee-un.*

Cornelius *Cor-neeel-yus.*

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Joppa *Jop-uh.*

Judea *Joo-dee-uh.*

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un.*

proselytes *prahss-uh-lights.*

Pentecost *Pen-tih-kost.*

Samaritans *Suh-mare-uh-tunz.*

Introduction

A. Still Waiting?

According to the Deaf Bible Society, only 2 percent of people who are deaf worldwide have been introduced to the gospel. As a result, the deaf constitute one of the largest and least-reached demographics. A man who was deaf recounted his story of attending church while he grew up, but never understanding what Jesus had done.

Although there are estimated to be several hundred sign languages in use worldwide, only recently has there been an effort to begin Bible translation among these communities. As of this writing, not a single sign language has a complete Bible translation, not even American Sign Language (ASL)!

But wait—since deafness is not a visual impairment, why do people who cannot hear need a Bible translation just for them? By one estimate, the great majority of children who are deaf cannot read. Thus having a video Bible translated into sign language overcomes a barrier.

We should not assume that everyone is aware of the good news of Jesus. That was the situation for many in the first century AD. And many or most Jews who *were* aware of the gospel thought that Gentiles didn't need to know because non-Jews were, by and large, excluded (see Acts 10:45; 11:1–18). But God had a different idea, as today's lesson demonstrates.

B. Lesson Context

Today's passage is an excerpt from a longer story that extends from Acts 10:1 to 11:18. The length of this account, which comprises more than 6 percent of the book of Acts, reflects its significance.

This turning point in history occurred after the day of Pentecost, when the apostle Peter had declared in his gospel message that “the promise is for you ... and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). Given Peter's surprise in today's passage, he may have presumed that “all who are far off” referred only to all *Jews* who were far off (compare addressees in James 1:1).

Our lesson text has Peter standing before a Gentile audience, poised to share the gospel. This was a huge step for Peter. To observant Jews, Gentiles were unclean pagans, who might endanger the apostles' own religious and moral purity. Any sharing of faith beliefs by Jews to Gentiles would have been “clean” ones testifying to “unclean” ones.

But God was changing that mind-set. The correction began with two visions that occurred about 21 hours apart: the first to a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10:1–6) and the second to the apostle Peter (10:9–16). The respective locations were the cities of Caesarea Maritima and Joppa, about 30 miles apart, on the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea.

Cornelius was no ordinary Gentile. He had a track record of praying to Israel's God and modeling generosity to his neighbors (Acts 10:2). There is no indication, however, that Cornelius had fully converted to Judaism. Luke (the author of Acts) refers to individuals like Cornelius as fearing God and/or being “devout” (10:2; 13:26; 17:4, 17). This was in contrast to “proselytes” —

those who had converted to Judaism fully (6:5; 13:43). Even so, God, recognizing the sincerity of Cornelius's faith, chose this man to be the starting point for extending the gospel to Gentiles.

God reached out to Cornelius by means of an angel, who instructed him to send for Peter (Acts 10:3–8). Next, God gave Peter a vision in which the apostle was commanded repeatedly to eat food forbidden to Jews (10:9–16). This conveyed a message that what had been declared unclean was no longer so.

Immediately following Peter's vision, messengers from Cornelius arrived and invited Peter to the Gentile's house (Acts 10:17–23). Upon arriving, Cornelius and Peter shared their experiences (10:24–33). This takes us into today's text.

I. Peter's Message (Acts 10:34–43)

A. God's Invitation to Gentiles (vv. 34–35)

34. Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism

Having evaluated the sequence of events, *Peter* realized that his own vision, disturbing as it was, had been timed to coincide perfectly with the vision to Cornelius. Peter therefore could draw no conclusion other than *that God does not show favoritism*—he is impartial in intending the gospel for everyone (see also Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17).

35. but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Here, the word *nation* does not refer to political identity but to ethnic and religious background. People everywhere who *fear* God and who demonstrate that fear by obeying him are welcome. If this seems obvious to us after 2,000 years of Christian history, it was shocking to Peter and his first-century Jewish compatriots (compare Acts 10:45; 11:17–18).

We can imagine Peter's surprise to hear these words coming from his own mouth! This occasion marked the first time that an Israelite offered Gentiles the opportunity of becoming full beneficiaries of God's covenant—a new covenant—without requiring circumcision (compare Acts 15:1–21; Galatians 2:2–5).

B. God's Invitation to Jews (vv. 36–37)

36. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Despite the nature of his audience, Peter did not hide the fact that Jesus' ministry focused almost exclusively on *the people of Israel* (compare Matthew 15:24). But at the same time, Peter noted that *Jesus*, who was the anticipated *Christ*—meaning "anointed one" (see Acts 10:38, below)—of the Jews, to be the *Lord of all* people.

The *peace* Jesus preached referred primarily to peace between God and sinners. But in the context of Peter's sermon, it also included peace between divided people groups (Gentiles and Jews) that becomes possible through common faith in Christ.

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:2–3). As the messenger of God’s *message*, Jesus came to fulfill that promise (see Luke 4:18–21). Old Testament prophets had looked forward to a day when God would bring peace to the whole world (see Isaiah 52:7); Peter understood Jesus as the fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus is the only way to have full peace with both God (Romans 5:1) and fellow humans (Ephesians 2:14).

37. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—

The phrase *you know what has happened* indicates a certain level of prior knowledge on the part of Peter’s Gentile audience (compare Acts 26:26). But there was still more to learn! So Peter framed his teaching by setting two reference points: one of geography (*throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee*) and one of chronology (*after the baptism that John preached*).

Another way to say this is that the gospel of Jesus became a historical reality in both place and time (see Mark 1:9; Luke 4:14–20; 16:16; Galatians 4:4). His ministry was preceded by that of John the Baptist, who preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

C. Jesus’ Mission to the World (vv. 38–41)

38a. how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power,

The designation *Jesus of Nazareth*, used often by Jesus’ enemies, was well known by this time (John 18:5, 7; 19:19). Regarding *the Holy Spirit and power* by which Jesus began his ministry, see Luke 4:14–20.

38b. and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

The primary purpose of Jesus’ miracles—whether they dealt with physical *healing* or spiritual relief from oppression by *the devil*—was to provide evidence of his divine nature (John 14:11). Many people, sadly, didn’t grasp that, choosing instead to focus on passing physical needs rather than enduring spiritual issues (John 6:26). And many who *did* see a connection between Jesus and the supernatural chose to identify him with the worst elements of the demonic realm (Luke 11:15). Even so, Jesus had authority to bring physical and spiritual liberation because *God was with him*.

39. “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross,

Peter pressed to the heart of Jesus’ ministry, having witnessed it firsthand. Indeed, to be *witnesses* was the task for which Jesus had chosen him and the other apostles (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:8). In this regard, Peter points a finger directly at *the Jews*, not the Romans, as being responsible for Jesus’ death (see also Acts 5:29–30). Yet the testimony of Jesus’ death doesn’t end there.

40a. but God raised him from the dead on the third day

God’s ultimate vindication of Jesus was the resurrection. It happened *on the third day* after Jesus was crucified, just as he had said would happen (Luke 9:22; 18:33; compare 24:7, 46). All

Jesus' teachings and miraculous works led up to this point. All Jesus' teachings and miracles would have been for naught had the resurrection not occurred (1 Corinthians 15:13–19). It is the resurrection that confirms Jesus to be the Son of God (see Romans 1:4), who has the power over death (Revelation 1:18).

40b. and caused him to be seen.

We can be certain of the resurrection because God *caused* the resurrected Jesus *to be seen*. Peter and others actually saw the risen Christ themselves (see Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:36–53; John 20:11–29; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

41. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

An interesting fact of the resurrection is that between that event and Jesus' ascension, Jesus is recorded to have been seen only by believers. They had seen the evidence of his miracles and had rejected him nonetheless. They had attributed his work to demonic power once before (Luke 11:15) and could be expected to do so again.

This underscores the unique role of Jesus' followers. God chose specific *witnesses* to encounter his resurrected Son (see Luke 24:45–48). For Peter, standing before Cornelius, this is where the gospel message became personal. God had put the stamp of approval on Peter and his message by means of the two visions mentioned earlier. That message was crucial to bringing Jesus to the Gentiles, starting with this household.

D. Jesus' Commission (vv. 42–43)

42. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

What we call the Great Commission, from Matthew 28:19–20, is worded this way:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

The verse before us might be seen to specify additional elements of method and message of that commission. The methods so specified are *to preach* and *to testify*; the message is that Jesus was *appointed by God to judge ... the living and the dead*.

When added to earlier references of Jesus' impartiality (Acts 10:34–35) and his title of "Lord of all" (10:36), the role of judge makes sense. The broad scope of Jesus' lordship is viable in his perfect impartiality as judge.

43. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

God fearers such as Cornelius likely had some knowledge of the witness of the Old Testament *prophets*. Thus it was appropriate for Peter to refer to them here, while in other contexts it may not have been (as in Acts 17:22–34).

No specific prophets are noted, but the Old Testament provides numerous examples of prophetic witness. Isaiah foresaw a day when people "will be forgiven" (Isaiah 33:24), through

the one who “was pierced for our transgressions” (53:5), the “righteous servant” who would “justify many” (53:11).

In a similar vein, Jeremiah hoped for a day when the Lord would “forgive their wickedness” and “remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). Daniel spoke of a time that would bring the “end to sin” and the Lord would “atone for wickedness” (Daniel 9:24). In speaking to Cornelius and the other God fearers gathered, Peter emphasized that the person who fulfilled such prophecies had arrived.

We note that Acts 10:36–43 may be a concise summary of a sermon that went on for hours. Perhaps there were many pauses to answer questions. Some students see in these eight verses a highly condensed version of the four Gospels.

II. Two Outcomes (Acts 10:44–47)

A. Spirit Poured Out (vv. 44–46a)

44. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

On hearing Peter’s message, these Gentiles might have had all types of questions. How could they be sure Jesus was the Messiah? They could have doubted the message like so many before. But before *Peter* could finish speaking, *the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message*. If any further evidence was needed, that was it!

45. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

The circumcised believers refers to those Christians present who were of Jewish descent; those *who had come with Peter* were six in number, according to Acts 11:12. To a man, they *were astonished* at God’s giving of *the Holy Spirit* to the *Gentiles*.

As Peter would recount later, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). Those last nine words are a key to the importance and rarity of such an outpouring. It obviously had occurred only once before: on the day of Pentecost. This has caused some to refer to the outpouring of Acts 10:44–47 as “the Gentile Pentecost.”

46a. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

The Spirit worked with this Gentile audience in a way similar to his work on the day of Pentecost, allowing them to speak *in tongues*. This is only the second instance in Acts where Luke describes speaking with tongues, which is the ability to speak in foreign languages that one has not studied (see Acts 2:6–12).

This was divine authentication of Gentile inclusion. For a Jewish audience who had experienced the outpouring of tongues at Pentecost, hearing of the same occurring among a Gentile audience would further stress that God is impartial.

B. Baptism Enacted (vv. 46b–47)

46b–47. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

For the first-century church, baptism followed as a response to the gospel message and faith in Christ (see Acts 2:38; 8:26–39; etc.). Consistent with this pattern, *Peter* asked rhetorically why *no one can stand in the way* of the new believers, *being baptized*.

Having seen the Holy Spirit at work in Cornelius and his household, Peter didn’t have to ask whether or not they believed. The presence of God’s *Spirit* made this clear! And so the first Gentiles entered the fellowship of God.

Conclusion

A. New Humanity

The scope of God’s salvation is highlighted in today’s pivotal text, when Gentiles received an outpouring of God’s Spirit as Jews had earlier. Questions remained regarding what role former identity markers of God’s people—markers such as circumcision, dietary laws, and observance of special days—would continue to play. Such questions were settled at the famous Jerusalem Council of Acts 15: these external markers were no longer essential to the people of God.

God’s plan was to spread the news of salvation through his old-covenant people, the Jews (John 4:22). Jesus was Jewish, as were his closest disciples. All people who were not Jewish were lumped into a single category: Gentiles. (Samaritans could be a complicating additional category.)

To devout Jews, Gentiles were regarded as complete outsiders unless they adhered to the Law of Moses (Exodus 12:48–49; etc.). Today’s passage overturned all this. We can do no better than allow the apostle Paul to summarize this change:

Christ Jesus ... [set] aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity.... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

—Ephesians 2:13–18

The good news of God’s kingdom is now available to all who believe (see Romans 1:16). We should be on the lookout for people such as Cornelius—individuals who may be open to hearing the gospel, but who have never had it explained.

B. Prayer

Lord, it should not surprise us that you created for yourself a people from all humanity. Rid us of any tendency to set up walls within the body of Christ that your Spirit has already knocked down. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God doesn’t discriminate;
salvation is for *all* people—period.¹

¹