

Bible Studies about Peter

Study 12: Peter's Vision from God

BETHANY HOPE BIBLE STUDIES

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Background

In our previous study we looked at Peter's burgeoning ministry.

In this study we will be taking a look at the transformative vision that Peter had in Caesarea, which is detailed in Acts 10. As a general rule, whenever something is repeated in Scripture, it is of particular significance. The account of Peter's vision from God may be found in Acts 10 – but it is also repeated in Chapter 11 and referred to in Chapter 15. And of course we know the significance of this vision – addressing the 'Gentile question', and the embracing of Gentile converts into Christian faith and fellowship.

The Message

We should not fail to appreciate some of the religious tensions that existed at this time. In Acts 10:28, Peter says *"You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."*¹ The law forbade association of Jews with Gentiles. Yet Peter had come to a point of understanding of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the body of Christ through his vision from God which emphasised on three occasions that *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."*² Peter was prepared to break with his culture to remain faithful to God even though what God had revealed to him 'went against the grain'; it was not only Paul who had a dramatic conversion experience which literally changed his life. Some scholars express a view that the Jews brought the light to the Gentiles, and that the Gentiles subsequently brought the light back to the Jews through a prophetic relationship between the church and Israel – something which is alluded to in the book of Ruth which we will look at in a future study.

In this account in Acts 10, we read about Cornelius who was the second known Gentile convert to Christianity (the first being an Ethiopian treasurer we may read of in Acts 8:26-40). There had been a heart change in Cornelius and following his vision and encounter with the Gentiles, there was a heart change in Peter. In bringing a message from God, our hearts may also be changed.

In Peter's address to the Gentiles, he begins by saying *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*³ I am not sure that at this point Peter truly understood the implications of this, or even how this 'inclusion' might be realised⁴. I also believe that it must have been with some personal cost that Peter brought this message...it can be hard to embrace a revelation which shatters everything you had believed up until that point. Certainly as we continue reading through Acts 10, we learn that *"the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."*⁵ We should never seek to limit the Holy Spirit or seek to define God on our terms, but we

¹ Acts 10:28

² Acts 10:15

³ Acts 10:34b-35

⁴ See also Luke 2:32 and Revelations 14:6

⁵ Acts 10:44b-48a

should always seek God's will and be prepared to lay our own prejudices and perceptions at the foot of the cross. The fruit of the Spirit was very much in evidence upon these new Gentile believers; the seal that we read of Ephesians 1.

We do know that Peter brought this 'revelation' to the early church (see Acts 11) and despite receiving some initial resistance when he gave testimony to what had happened the detractors "*were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*⁶ It also took time for Peter to fully understand how the inclusion was to be realised – see Galatians 2 – which tells us how Peter was rebuked by Paul for getting it wrong later in his ministry. We all need to live in humility and be prepared to accept constructive criticism. This is something that is tremendously difficult for many people and I think that Christians are often not very good at speaking the truth in love.

The transformative nature of Peter's vision may perhaps be summarised in another quote from Galatians:

"...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."⁷

Questions

1. Can you think of any ways in which you are prejudiced in our faith and mission (to race, culture, creed or gender)?
2. Can you identify what the root causes of this prejudice might be and how might these prejudices be changed?
3. How should we live out our Christian faith alongside people with other faiths and beliefs?

⁶ Acts 11:18

⁷ Galatians 3:26-29