

One for All and All for The One

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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Genesis 12:1-3 (NRSV)

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Acts 10:34-48 (NRSV)

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

The Spirit arrived with great power on Pentecost, empowering all the believers. Now it is the Gentiles’ turn, for the Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence within and among all those who come to faith in Christ, regardless of race, gender, age, education, nationality, or any division we try to create. The Spirit is God at work!

A promise made for all?

Here’s the question the apostles had to face in the years after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: Was Jesus the savior of the Jews only or would the Gentiles¹ be saved also? To put a finer point to it: Would Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus have to first become Jewish, taking on the keeping of the Jewish Law?

It can seem easy to open the pages of Scripture and answer this question. Isn’t the promise made to Abraham a promise that encompasses “all the families of the earth?” Yes (Genesis 12:3). Weren’t the Jews given by God to be “light to the nations?” Yes (Isaiah 49:6). Didn’t God promise a day when nation no longer lifted up sword against nation but they all sat under fig trees unafraid? Yes (Micah 4:4). And on . . . and on . . .

¹“Gentile” simply means “not Jewish.”

Yet, piles of Scripture can still leave the human heart untouched. Who could blame the Jews for losing their sense of mission to the world? The Assyrians had scattered ten tribes to the winds. The Babylonians had burned their temple and sent tens of thousands into exile. And for most of the last five hundred years, the Jews had traded one pagan, Gentile oppression for another, the latest edition being written in Latin.

We need to have some sympathy for Peter and the other apostles as they struggled to hear and to live out God's incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Abraham, i.e., into God's plan to rescue Israel and the whole world. Even the gift of

"Works of the Law"

There is a phrase we sometimes use to express the idea that we can do enough good acts (good works) to make ourselves acceptable to God, to get to "heaven" as it were. The phrase is "works righteousness." Much of Christian teaching is devoted to showing the fallacy of this notion. We are made right with God by God's grace, for we are simply unable to love sufficiently on our own. We can never earn our way into God's presence.

Christians have often mistakenly assumed that the ancient Jews practiced "works righteousness." We think that the Jews believed that if they could keep the Law in all its many details they would be saved and get to "heaven;" hence, all the Pharisees' concern about law-keeping. But this is a caricature of ancient Judaism.

Instead, the Jews of Jesus day believed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples on the earth. They, the people of God, would one day be God's renewed and restored people. Thus, the question for a Jew was whether someone was in the people of God or not. Did they belong or not? Could the person wear the "badge of membership?" If they wore the badge, they would be made right with God.

When Peter is concerned about what he can eat or Paul speaks of the "works of the law," they are referring to the Jewish external symbols of membership in the people of God: Sabbath-keeping, adherence to the food laws, circumcision, and so on. These "works of the law," he writes, are no longer the badges of membership in the people of God, now the only badge of membership is faith in Jesus Christ.

God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost did not obliterate the apostles' confusion and concerns.

All this said, we aren't then surprised that the story of the first conversion of a genuine, completely-outside-the-family, Gentile, is no simple matter. We get angels, visions, and the Spirit's direct intervention. The whole story, from Acts 10:1-11:18, including Peter's defense of his actions, is by far the longest story in the book of Acts.

Even the Gentiles

Cornelius is an important man, an officer in the Roman Army. He and his family live in Caesarea, a large city built by the Romans on the Mediterranean coast northwest of Jerusalem. Cornelius is one of the God-fearers, Gentiles who are drawn to the God of Israel and even read the Hebrew Scriptures (in Greek!) and pray to God – but are NOT Jewish, which, for Cornelius, would mean circumcision.² Though not Jewish, he is a devout and generous man.

One day an angel comes to Cornelius to let him know that God has heard his prayer and seen his generosity. The angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter.

The next day, before Cornelius' men arrive in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his house praying. He grows hungry and falls into a trance. He then has a vision in which, basically, despite being a Jew, he is commanded to eat pork. Peter, of course, protests, for the food laws, like circumcision, set the Jews apart. If you ate

²Circumcision was one of what Paul calls "the works of the Law" that distinguished between Jews from non-Jews. It was a boundary marker. The food laws, which were the focus of Peter's vision, were also boundary markers. See the text box above for more.

pork, you weren't Jewish. If you ate pork, you were not part of the people of God.

When Peter wakes up he is puzzled by what the vision meant but then the Spirit of God speaks to him, telling him that the front doorbell is about to ring and he should go with the men he will meet at the door . . . and he does.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius' home, he learns that Cornelius has gathered both family and friends. Cornelius falls on his knees to worship Peter, who gently corrects him. It seems that the purpose of all this is dawning on Peter, for he tells the gathering of Gentiles that God has shown him no one is "unclean" just as no food, such as pork, is "unclean." People are people and food is food. Old boundaries no longer have any use.

Cornelius tells Peter that a "man in dazzling clothes," came to him and had him send for Peter. Now, Cornelius, along with his family and friends, are ready to hear Peter's message. And Peter proceeds to tell them the story of Jesus, who is the "Lord of all." Even before Peter finishes, the Holy Spirit takes his dwelling within these Gentiles, enabling them to speak in tongues³. Then Peter, seeing what was happening, baptized them all with water in the name of Jesus Christ.

There are a couple of important things to notice about the story.

- First, this is all God's doing – in the person of the Holy Spirit. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
- Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by God's insistence that, in essence, it is acceptable to eat pork. The much-protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God. Your reading of the New Testament will be helped tremendously if you understand that this question became a long-running dispute. Acts 15 tells the story of major meeting of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem in 49AD to address this question.

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter's baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jewish believers, Peter shouldn't have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God's way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised . . . and avoid pork . . . and keep the Sabbath . . . and so on. The decision made by the conference was a firm "no," though those who wished certainly could keep the Law in good conscience.

Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such "works of the Law" (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from non-believers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us. It is the Spirit who is given to all who share in this faith.

As Paul would write to Christians in western Asia Minor (Turkey): "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). . . . *One for all and all for The One!*

³We can't really know from the text whether this experience of the power of the Spirit is the same as at Pentecost, when the disciples were enabled to speak in other languages. It could be or it could be another manifestation of the Spirit. But, like Acts 2, we know it was audible. Personally, I think it was a Pentecost 2 experience, signifying again the undoing of the tower of Babel.

Conversions in Acts

In his commentary on Acts, Will Willimon, currently a UMC bishop in Alabama, writes on the conversions in the book of Acts. Here is an excerpt:

Luke's rich collection of conversion accounts warns the church against making any one pattern or scheme *the* standard steps for conversion. The turning wrought by the Spirit takes a variety of forms, leads to a variety of responses, and is context-specific. Each person is called by his or her own name, so to speak, and dealt with as the Spirit sees fit. When was Peter converted? When Jesus called him to follow or when Peter confessed that Jesus was "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:20) or when Peter discovered that he did not, after all, know who was clean and unclean (Acts 10:1-11:18)? Luke will not let us settle down with one account or one moment. Peter was literally "on the way" as a member of "the Way." He resolved to follow Jesus, wherever that might take him. Surprises greeted him at each significant turn in the road.

David Steinmetz notes that the Protestant Reformers were so convinced that sin is so deep-rooted in human thinking and willing, that the gospel is so demanding and different, that only a lifetime of conversion can change us into the new creations God has in mind for us. The modern evangelical notion that conversion is an instantaneous, momentary phenomenon is not rooted in the thought of the Reformers nor, we might add, in the thought of Luke. Even Paul's dramatic encounter upon the Damascus road (reported three times in Acts—with significant differences in each account), required interpretation, reflection, and the confirmation of the community. Presumably, we never become too old, too adept at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need for more conversion, additional turning. The Christian life is akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of Paul—a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God. Conversion is a process more than a moment.

Conversions in Luke-Acts are *stories about beginnings*—the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church, the initiation of a new mission, as well as the beginning of a new life for the individual person. Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey, not its final destination. Moreover, conversions in Acts are *stories about vocation*—someone is being called for some godly work. Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel. Finally, conversions in Acts are *stories about the gifts of God*—God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip's work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of "free will" and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. "*By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope ...*" (1 Peter 1:3b; author's italics.)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The story of Cornelius' conversion is about many things, but it is surely about inclusiveness, to use a buzz-word from our day. The Jews had fought long and hard to maintain their identity, to stay true to their Jewishness and to their God as best as they knew how. Despite God's promise to Abraham and all the expansive word-pictures of the prophets, the first believers, all of whom are Jewish, are shocked and astounded that God's Spirit would be poured out on a Gentile. Questions of exclusivity inevitably arise for Christians. For 2,000 years nearly all Christians have claimed rightly that, in the end, we must come to God through Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ is inescapably the boundary marker that sets apart the people of God. Yet, just as Peter was surprised, how might we be surprised? How does any notion of a boundary marker or a badge of membership work against our seeing God's work in the world? Does Jesus belong only to the Christians? Does God?
2. God's Holy Spirit is poured out upon Cornelius and the others as they are moved to faith by the proclamation of the Good News. Another way to put this would be to say that God's Spirit began to dwell within them or that they had been given the Spirit. The Spirit is likewise given to all believers. How is the Spirit's presence within you manifested in your life? How would anyone know? What is the fruit of the Spirit's work in and with you? (See Galatians 5:22-23) How can we gain greater confidence that we are strengthened and comforted by the same Spirit who strengthened and comforted the apostles and all the first believers?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on the incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Israel.

<p>Monday, Isaiah 49:1-6 God and all the nations</p>	<p>Tuesday, Micah 4 Not only is Israel to be lifted up and restored, all the nations are to be brought to God's house, to worship the God-who-is.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 4:23-38 Hmmm . . . Luke's genealogy of Jesus. Note that Jesus is traced all the way to Adam, not just to Abraham as in Matthew's. Luke's point is that Jesus is savior of <i>all</i>.</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 4 Abraham isn't merely an example of faith. The story begun with Abraham's faith reaches its culmination in the faith of Christ. It is our own faith in Christ- and faith alone - that marks us out at God's.</p>
<p>Friday, Galatians 3:1-9 How hard it was for some Jewish believers to give up their devotion to the works of the Law and supposed ethnic privilege. Harsh words from Paul! This letter was probably written at about the same time as the big meeting recounted in Acts 15.</p>	<p>Saturday, Acts 15 The story of the conference called in Jerusalem to address whether Gentile believers had to keep the Law.</p>

