

“FORGIVENESS OF SINS THROUGH HIS NAME”

Acts 9:32–10:48

Key Verse: 10:43

“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Are there people you keep your distance from? People you'd never think of personally associating with? We may have many good reasons for doing so. But in today's passage we see God's view of people is different from ours. God uses dramatic measures to help Peter go to people he always thought he should avoid. Why? The Risen Jesus told his apostles, “You will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth” (1:8). It's God's plan to save people of the whole world. But God's people, including Peter, are slow to understand it. We're just the same. Today's passage shows us more about what it means to be a witness of Jesus. It especially shows our need for a change of heart in how we view people, so that God can actually use us. May God speak to us through his word.

This passage is a major turning point in Acts. Since chapter 8, God has been working outside Jerusalem to bring the good news of Jesus to more and more people: the Samaritans, an Ethiopian eunuch, God's enemy Saul (whom we will see later), and here, to Jews in areas along the coast. But in chapter 10 God crosses a major hurdle and brings the good news of Jesus to Gentiles. The person God uses is none other than Peter, the leader of his church. But for many reasons it's not an easy transition for Peter. Let's see how God helps him.

For now, the persecution has died down, and the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria has peace and is being built up (31). Peter is free to go here and there among them (32). So he's out and about, shepherding all these scattered people of God. Peter wants to share the good news of Jesus with people who still haven't heard. Look at verse 32b. Lydda was on a road 23 miles northwest of Jerusalem, right where the mountains end and the coastal plain of Sharon begins. Lydda's population was mostly Jewish, and it's likely that Christians from Jerusalem had fled there. Look at verse 33. Aeneas is probably a believer, but he's been suffering from paralysis for eight years. Just as God used Peter to help a similar man in Jerusalem, Peter now tells this man, “Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed” (34). It's Jesus who heals Aeneas through

Peter's faith. And it's for more than just personal benefit. God uses this healing to bring many more people in this remote area to believe in Jesus (35).

The next location is Joppa. It's 12 miles from Lydda, on the Mediterranean Sea. It's another predominantly Jewish city with scattered Christians there, too. This time, the focus is on a woman, Tabitha, who's called "a disciple." She's been following Jesus practically. In contrast to paralyzed Aeneas, she'd been "full of good works and acts of charity" (36b). She blessed others like Jesus did. But tragedy strikes. Look at verse 37. This generous, hard-working woman had been so dear to them. Look at verse 38. Why do they send this request? They believe that in Jesus, Peter can do something. How does he respond? Look at verse 39a. Like Jesus, Peter goes with those who have faith. And what does he find? Look at verse 39b. Tabitha had been using her own hands to make clothing for these poor widows. Her faith to serve was unforgettable.

What does Peter do? Look at verse 40a. Peter has healed people before. Still, he comes to God humbly in prayer, really asking him what he should do now. And God gives him the answer. Look at verse 40b. God uses Peter to do the same kind of miracle our Lord Jesus did: raise the dead. And Peter is so kind. He gives Tabitha his hand and raises her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presents her to them alive (41). God uses his servant Peter to help his people have resurrection faith and hope in Jesus. Again, it's not just for believers. The gospel spreads to even more people (42). Peter is now staying for many days with a man named Simon the tanner, who probably also is a believer (43). This is as far as Peter can think to go. But God has more in store for him.

Look at 10:1. Now we see Caesarea. It's 35 miles north of Joppa, also on the coast. Caesarea is a port city, a major shipping center in the Roman Empire. In Caesarea, Herod the Great built a palace, a temple to Caesar, and an amphitheater. The Roman prefect and Roman troops are stationed there. It has a large Jewish population. But because it's predominantly Gentile, it seems Peter would never have thought to go there. But an unlikely man named Cornelius lives there. Outwardly he's a Roman army officer, but he's so much more. Look at verse 2. It's surprising that a proud Roman army officer could be like this. But even a man like Cornelius is seeking God. He's described as "devout." The word means he's profoundly reverent toward God. He's influenced his wife, his children, and his servants to have his same reverence for God. It's amazing.

How could Cornelius be like this? At that time there were about five million Jews scattered in most of the major cities of the Roman Empire. They were keeping their faith, going to synagogue, studying and teaching the Old Testament, praying and worshiping God. Some were even helping the Gentiles around them to learn their devout, God-fearing faith.¹ Cornelius must have been one of them. Hearing about God from the Scriptures, he believes that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb.11:6). His position could have made him hardened and worldly. But he's learned to live before God and to seriously seek to please him. He's even been giving out of his own income to care for those in need. He's a busy army officer, but he's praying to God continually, meaning he's faithful to morning and afternoon prayers. Cornelius is not a Jew. But clearly he's seeking God with all his heart. We may not think anyone is like that. But such people are always out there. The Bible tells us that God's eyes "run to and fro throughout the whole earth" to find people like Cornelius (2 Chron.16:9a).

Look at verses 3–4. It's the ninth hour of the day—3:00 PM, the afternoon time of prayer. While he prays, God reaches out to this man. An angel calls his name, "Cornelius." He stares at him in terror and says, "What is it, Lord?" The angel says, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God." They're like the smoke of incense that's a pleasing aroma to God. Then the angel gives specific instructions. Cornelius will get the privilege of a visit from Peter himself (5–6). What does he do? Look at verses 7–8. Cornelius has even influenced one of his soldiers to also be devout. But mainly, Cornelius obeys the heavenly vision. In Acts, this is important. Ananias has just obeyed a heavenly vision of an angel (9:10–19). Peter also is about to have a heavenly vision. Later, Paul obeys heavenly visions.² What does this tell us? It's showing that praying and giving are really good, but listening to God is even better.

Next, God brings Peter to Cornelius. Look at verse 9. Now we're back in Joppa, the next day. The sixth hour is 12 noon. For most Jews, lunch is the first meal of the day. Because the smell of tanning is so strong, the house of Simon the tanner is by the sea (6,32). Peter's up on the roof, enjoying the fresh sea air, the view, and alone time to pray. But he's also hungry (10a). The food is being

¹ For the "devout" Gentiles, see 13:43,50; 17:4,17; for God-fearing Gentiles, see 10:35; 13:16,26.

² 16:9–10; 18:9–11; 26:14–20.

prepared downstairs, and Peter can smell it. He falls into a trance (10b). What does he see? Look at verses 11–12. Heaven is being opened. Something like a great sheet is descending, being let down by its four corners on the earth. And in this sheet are all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds of the air.

What's going on? Look at verse 13. This is the voice of God. God is telling Peter, "Here's your lunch; have at it!" How does Peter respond? He says these creatures are the ones God forbade Jews to eat, and Peter's never done that (14). Read verse 15. This is the most important part of the vision. Here, "clean" means acceptable to God. We may have many ideas about this, but the Sovereign God, Maker of heaven and earth, gets to decide what is clean or common. The whole thing is repeated three times (16). God is saying most strongly that *he can make things clean*. He wants Peter to listen. Instead of listening to all the rules in our heads, or even to our conscience, most of all we need to listen to God. Through this vision, God is helping Peter to have a deeper change of mind and heart. The change God wants for us has to go so deep, it gets at the habits of our heart, even what we have a taste for. Peter's a wonderful shepherd and man of great faith in Jesus. But through this vision God is performing spiritual open-heart surgery on him, to get him ready to be even more useful to him. Through changing Peter's heart, God wants to change the direction of the whole church. Like Peter, if our heart is not changed in certain respects, we get stuck in our own ways and can't follow what God wants.

And again we see God's leading. Look at verses 17–18. At this very moment, the men from Cornelius show up at the gate of the house, asking for Peter, though it seems he can't hear them. Look at verses 19–20. Now, the Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with these Gentiles, because they're actually sent by God himself. When Peter goes down to meet them, he hears how the centurion Cornelius is a God-fearing, well-respected man, who's seen an angel telling him to send for Peter to come (21–22). These men have just traveled 35 miles on an all-night journey. They're tired, thirsty, and hungry. So Peter invites them for lunch (23a). The next day, after they've rested, Peter goes with them and brings some men from Joppa with him (23b). A day later, they all enter Caesarea (24a). What do they find? Look at verse 24b. Cornelius has brought everyone near and dear to him to be there. It shows once more how sincere, serious and unselfish he is. When Peter finally enters, Cornelius has too much reverence for him (25–26). When Peter gets inside, he finds all these people there (27). Luke wants us

to appreciate this truly historic moment. Peter begins by addressing the barrier between them, and how God has helped him cross it (28). Even believers and servants of God like Peter can have prejudices that block us. Before going further, Peter wants to hear for himself what they really want from him. So Cornelius repeats what happened to him (30–33a). Read verse 33b. We too should prepare with such an attitude to listen to God’s messenger. The highlight here is Peter’s message. It’s his final message in Acts. What does he say?

First, God’s view of people. Read verses 34–35. God has helped Peter to see people as he does. How does God see people? God doesn’t care about our race or nationality. God doesn’t play favorites, either. God doesn’t judge based on superficial, outward things. God doesn’t treat us as unclean. God is looking at our hearts. He cares most about whether we fear him and do what is right. Anyone can learn to fear God and seek him, so there’s hope for all people. We need to see people the way God does, have hope for them, and pray for them all.

Next, “the good news of peace.” Read verse 36. Peter begins telling them the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can bring people in every nation this good news of peace. It’s not necessarily peace from human conflict. It’s the good news of peace with God (Rom.5:1). If only we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we can have real peace among people. Jesus is King of all peoples of all nations; he’s the Prince of Peace (Isa.9:6b). For Luke, the peace that Jesus brings is so important.³ Our Lord Jesus told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). He gave them another promise: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). This good news of peace through Jesus Christ is available to anyone who turns to him in faith. We need to tell people this.

Third, “he is Lord of all.” Read verse 36 again. This is a major theme in Acts. He’s repeatedly called “the Lord Jesus,” from the beginning of the book to the end.⁴ He’s Lord of all through his resurrection from the dead.⁵ The Risen Jesus is not just above all people and nations; he’s also our living Lord,

³ Luke 1:79; 2:14,29; 7:29; 8:48; 10:5–6; 19:38,42; 24:36.

⁴ 1:21; 4:33; 7:59; 8:16; 9:17; 11:17,20; 15:11,26; 16:31; 19:5,13,17; 20:21,24,35; 21:13; 28:31.

⁵ 1:22; 2:31; 4:33; 13:33; 17:31–32.

accessible in prayer, and ready and able to help each one of his people. He's the one worthy to give our lives to. He's our new identity, and he saves anyone who calls on his name.⁶ He wants his name as Lord of all to be brought to all the Gentiles, even their kings (9:15). There is no one in the world who does not need Jesus Christ, Lord of all. We need to be praying for and bringing the name of Jesus even to the greatest and best people in the world today.

Fourth, the healing Jesus brings. Peter goes on to share what may be the most beautiful summary of the life of Jesus. Look at verse 37. Peter says even this group of Gentiles has heard about Jesus. What is it they heard? Read verse 38. No one ever lived such a graceful, beautiful, powerful life as Jesus did. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus brought healing and freedom to people oppressed in all kinds of ways. If we give people his name, he still heals.

Fifth, witnesses. Look at verses 39–41. After such a beautiful life and ministry, people were so evil, they put Jesus to death by hanging him on a tree. In all the world's history, it was the greatest injustice ever committed. But God raised Jesus from the dead. And God made him appear to his followers who knew him. Jesus' death and resurrection is well-attested by the 12 apostles who personally witnessed it all. God can still help people believe this good news based on all this eyewitness testimony so precious preserved in the Bible.

Sixth, forgiveness of sins through his name. Read verse 42. Peter is sharing this good news only because the Lord Jesus commanded him and the others to preach it. Through his crucifixion, people thought they could get rid of Jesus. But God raised him from the dead and appointed him to be judge of the living and the dead. God will surely bring about his ultimate justice. It will happen when Jesus comes again (Acts 1:11). On that day, all people who ever lived will have to come stand before him and give an account of all they did on earth. For now it seems people get away with all kinds of sins and evil. But not forever. Because of his resurrection and ascension, we can be sure Jesus will come again, and he will judge the world in righteousness (17:31). It's good news.

But there's even better news. Read verse 43. "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." We all deserve God's judgment and wrath due to our sins. Even

⁶ 2:21; 9:14,21; 15:17; 22:16.

relatively good people like Cornelius can't measure up to God's holy standards. There are so many self-righteous, self-confident people. But the Bible says, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Mal.3:2) Yet anyone, even the worst of sinners, can receive forgiveness of sins through his name. We just need to repent and believe in Jesus. This message of forgiveness of sins is throughout the book of Acts, and it's for all people.⁷ We're all sinners, and we all need to repent and put our faith in Jesus. Are you sure your sins are forgiven? We can't earn forgiveness through good works or even the greatest sincerity and efforts. We receive the forgiveness of sins only by God's grace, through believing the name of Jesus. This is real gospel work: to help people truly receive forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus. If we haven't done that, we haven't really helped anyone.

What happens? Look at verse 44. Peter couldn't even finish all he wanted to say. The Holy Spirit came on those who heard the word. It's because they accepted the gospel. God in his wisdom chose to give an obvious sign that these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit (45–46a). It was not to make speaking in tongues a litmus test of spirituality. It was to provide further proof of the truth of the gospel: all people can receive the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins if only they repent and believe in Jesus. No other rules or laws are necessary. Because these people had already been changed by the Holy Spirit, Peter baptized them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (46b–48). Without Peter's help, it would be nearly impossible for the church to fully endorse Gentile ministry. Even if they accepted Jesus, Gentiles would likely have been treated as second-class citizens in the Christian community. But God's work in and through Peter changed the very nature of the church, and gave real hope to the world.

In this passage we saw how God brought the gospel of Jesus across the greatest barrier, to Gentiles. To do it, God had to change Peter's heart through a dramatic vision, to help him see people the way he does. Read 10:43. May God help us to truly receive the forgiveness of sins through Jesus, and have a new heart to share this good news even with people very different from us.

⁷ 2:38; 5:31; 13:38; 26:18.