

Acts 10:17-23

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The Holy Spirit Tells Peter to Go with Cornelius's Servants

Peter wonders what the vision meant. The men from Cornelius arrive at the house where he is staying, and the Spirit prompts him to go away with these men to wherever they will take him; to trust them, because they were sent by the Spirit. Peter obeys. He greets the men, hears how their master was visited by an angel, who told Cornelius to find Peter in Joppa. Peter invites them to stay for the night before they leave. The next morning Peter and a few other Jews head to Caesarea with Cornelius's servants.

Peter cannot make sense of what he has just witnessed. He is *greatly perplexed*. The bizarre display of unclean animals and the commandment to eat them, in violation of the Mosaic law, makes no sense to Peter. But the vision was in preparation for what is about to be asked of Peter, that he journey to Caesarea and preach the gospel to a group of “unclean” Roman Gentiles.

Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold the men who had been sent by Cornelius arrive (v. 17). Peter is giving a great deal of thought to the incredible vision he just experienced in a trance sent by God. God commanded him to violate the Law he had faithfully kept, and this has greatly perplexed his mind.

Peter knows there is truth in the *vision* because it was sent by God. But he cannot discern *what the vision which he had seen might be*, that is, what it really meant, what God was trying to communicate. While he sits on the rooftop pondering the unclean animals which God had made clean, *behold*, but look! The Gentile men who had been sent by Cornelius find Peter.

Cornelius was told by the angel exactly where Peter was, so the men knew whose house to seek: *having asked directions for Simon's house*, the two servants and the devout soldier sent by Cornelius *appeared at the gate* of Simon's house (v. 17). There are traditional sites of Simon the Tanner's house in current-day Joppa (Jaffa), that carry on the memory of this event ([See image of one traditional location](#)).

They begin asking questions, trying to confirm that the man they've been instructed to find is indeed staying there, *calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there* (v. 18).

While Peter was reflecting on the vision, still deep in thought trying to unravel the meaning of the vision he saw in the trance, the Holy Spirit speaks to him: "Behold, three men are looking for you. But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself" (v. 19-20).

The *Spirit* is constantly at work in this chapter, setting men in motion to make sure this meeting between Peter and Cornelius occurs, to ensure that God's chosen people preach His good news of salvation to the rest of the human race. He draws Peter's attention away from the dream back

to the real world, *Behold*. The Spirit informs Peter about the logistical information he needs to know, that there are *three men looking for him*, and that he needs to *get up, go downstairs and accompany them*.

Peter's time in Joppa has ended, the Spirit has a new mission assignment for him. But interestingly, the Spirit exhorts Peter to go with these men *without misgivings*. The reason why Peter should trust these men is because, according to the Holy Spirit, *"I have sent them Myself."* The only reason they are here is because the Spirit wants them to be there. God is at work. God is calling Peter to go.

But why would Peter have any *misgivings* in the first place? Since Christ's ascension, Peter has spent years boldly preaching the gospel, even at the risk of death and imprisonment. He has trusted the Spirit's lead since the Spirit fell on him and other believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The church has grown. The Sanhedrin is not actively persecuting followers of Christ for the time being (Acts 9:31).

Based on the ethnic tensions in this chapter, it seems probable that the reason the Spirit warns Peter not to have *misgivings* about these men is because they are Gentile Romans sent by a Roman centurion. Peter does not know that yet, but will soon learn it, which is why the Spirit prepares him to trust these men, whoever they are, wherever they will take him. The vision he just experienced was also sent to him to prepare him for this moment.

At that point in history, the gap between the Jews and the Gentiles in the rest of the world cannot be overemphasized. In some respects they might as well have been living on separate planets. The Jews were God's chosen people, they were to be holy, which means "set apart." Not like everyone else. And while Jesus had several meaningful interactions with Gentiles during His time on earth, most of His ministry was geared toward the Jewish people, because that was His assigned mission (Matthew 15:24).

Similarly, Peter has had nothing to do with the Gentiles thus far after Jesus's departure to Heaven. Despite the intended global reach of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), Peter and the other apostles and evangelists have only thought to spread the gospel to the Jewish people and the half-Jews (the Samaritans, Acts 8:12). This was not an unreasonable first step, since Jesus had told them they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, as well as the remotest parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). But now we will see God launch an initiative that will reach all peoples in all places.

Earlier in Acts 3, it is made clear that Peter still hopes that Israel as a nation would repent and accept its Messiah, leading to the Messiah's return, so that He might sit on the throne in Jerusalem and begin His earthly kingdom. This would mean that Israel might be restored and refreshed as promised (Acts 3:19-21, Jeremiah 23:5-6, Daniel 9:24, Acts 1:6-7).

But God is making a way for His reconciliation to all peoples. The vacuum left by the Jews who rejected Jesus the Messiah will be filled by the Gentiles, a branch grafted onto the tree of God's chosen people (Romans 11:15, 20).

Peter believes and obeys the *Spirit*. He climbs down from the rooftop of Simon the Tanner's house and *went down to Cornelius's men*. Greeting them, he says, "*Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?*" (v. 21).

The two servants and devout soldier of Cornelius explain their purpose, "*Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you*" (v. 22).

The men provide as much evidence and reassurance for Peter to trust them as they possibly can. They too know that he, as a Jew, and they, as representatives of an officer of the occupying empire, normally and naturally have nothing to do with one another.

But they do not hide who their master is: *Cornelius, a centurion* (a commander of one hundred Roman soldiers stationed in Israel).

However, they do not speak with any sort of authority or effort to order Peter along. They are careful and respectful, explaining what sort of man their master *Cornelius* is:

- *righteous*
- *God-fearing*
- and *well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews*

Earlier, Luke, the author of Acts, described Cornelius in similar terms, "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually" (v. 2). Though a Roman, Cornelius has come to believe in and worship Yahweh, the Living God of Israel.

Cornelius is *God-fearing*, meaning in simple terms that he values what God thinks of him over what man thinks. That he is *righteous* means he lives in obedience to God's right standard of how best to live, which at its core is to love Him with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to act accordingly.

Cornelius' *righteous* and *God-fearing* character is outwardly evident because he is *well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews*. This phrase can also be translated as "has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews" and most likely means that wherever Cornelius was known, he was respected. He gives financial support to the Jews of Caesarea, he apparently treats them well and was not oppressive like other Roman occupiers and government officials. He was sympathetic to *the Jews*, and by the very fact that he worships their God, he knows they are God's chosen people, therefore he treats them with respect.

Peter trusts these servants, because the *Spirit* told him to. He extends hospitality to the travelers: *So he invited them in and gave them lodging* (v. 23).

This also is unheard of, that a Jew would invite a Gentile Roman to stay with him.

It is a huge step for Peter, to invite Gentiles to come into his host's house. He is beginning to see what the vision was communicating.

They rest for the night, presumably sharing dinner and making conversation, establishing fellowship. The next morning, the servants depart. Out of obedience to the Holy Spirit, *on the next day* Peter also *got up and went away with them*. Peter does not go alone; *some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him* (v. 23). These *brethren* were also Jewish believers in Christ. Of the named Jewish believers in Joppa, we know of Simon the Tanner and Tabitha, who was recently raised back to life after succumbing to an illness (Acts 9:36, 43).

It is also interesting to note some parallels and distinctions between this narrative and the story of Jonah.

Jonah the prophet was told by God to speak a message to his Gentile enemies, the Assyrians. Jonah viewed the Assyrians as unholy and unclean, deserving of God's wrath, and did all he could to prevent God's compassion (grace) from reaching the Assyrians (Jonah 4:2). He went to *Joppa*, the same town where Peter was dwelling with Simon the Tanner, and sailed westward—in the opposite direction of his calling.

Peter likewise is told by God to speak a message to his Gentile enemies, the Romans. God begins to work on Peter's heart, changing how he perceives the unholy and unclean Gentiles as able to be cleansed and welcomed into God's compassion (v. 15). And Peter, whose father's name happened to be Jonah (Matthew 16:17) leaves Joppa, going exactly where God directed him to go.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; ¹⁸ and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." ²¹ Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" ²² They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." ²³ So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.