

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 25, Chapter 10 conclusion

We are still in Acts chapter 10. And while we'll finish it today, the issues that surface from its God-inspired words are most challenging and profoundly important to our faith; so we'll keep on hacking away at it to try to extract from these passages both the spiritual truth and the practical applications.

Jews well understand the primary issue underlying this chapter; it was the resolution of it that befuddled them. But gentile Christians have a hard time even discerning the nature of the actual issue; and if we don't properly understand the issue then we will misunderstand the outcome.

We finished up at verse 28 last time and to refresh our memories it says this:

^{CJB} **Acts 10:28** *He said to them, "You are well aware that for a man who is a Jew to have close association with someone who belongs to another people, or to come and visit him, is something that just isn't done. But God has shown me not to call any person common or unclean;*

The underlying issue that is being dealt with in Acts 10 is ritual purity especially as concerns Jewish relations with gentiles. At this point in history Traditions (Oral Torah) had, by now, substantially distorted what the Lord had ordained in the Torah about the ritual purity status of gentiles. Thus Acts chapter 10 is God in the process of straightening that out, much as Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew was also God straightening out wrong minded Traditions on a wide array of subjects.

Commentators like to say that the main issue in Acts 10 was about Peter (and other Jews) eating with gentiles; that's only true to a point. Food was, indeed, seen as perhaps the most serious, and preventable, opportunity for a Jew to become ritually defiled. Knowing which animals could and could not be eaten for food was easy and every Jewish child knew it by heart. It was the intricate rules about the handling of the food that was problematic and Tradition complicated the matter. There was any number of ways that perfectly kosher food could become unclean and therefore inedible through improper handling. It could happen from the animal being raised incorrectly; or by it being slaughtered incorrectly; or by not properly draining and disposing of the blood; or allowing it to come into contact with something else that was ritually unclean (including, especially, a ritually unclean person) because ritual impurity could be transmitted from object to object.

Middle Eastern hospitality always demanded that a guest was presented with food. So should a Jew venture into the home of a gentile, for them it would be like going into the contagious disease ward at a hospital. It was a big risk because even if the food they were offered was of a kind that a Jew could normally eat, there was no assurance about how it had been handled.

Even more, Jews considered gentiles as naturally unclean. So whatever a gentile touched be it food, furniture, clothing, bedding, the floors and walls of their homes, anything, the Jews believed those gentiles had transmitted their uncleanness to it and so it was nearly impossible that a Jew would not be infected with ritual impurity. Not only was the mere thought of it disgusting, there would then be a cumbersome and at times expensive process to return to a state of ritual purity using the remedies set down by the Law of Moses.

Why were gentiles considered by Jews as automatically unclean? Academic Jews would say it was primarily because gentiles were idolaters; they worshipped some other god than the God of Israel. It was also because gentile females didn't follow the proper procedures at the end of their periods, and that males didn't follow the proper procedures after intimacy with their wives, which could have cured the ritually impure conditions that resulted. But to the average everyday Jew, gentiles are unclean because Tradition says they are; that's just how gentiles were created. Yet, what about the God-fearer gentiles who were not idolaters, and instead worshipped only the God of Israel? That presented a particularly difficult conundrum about which there wasn't universal agreement within Judaism. Could they attend Synagogues? Could they dine with Jews? Could they go to the Temple? In the end it turns out that for Jews of this era the conundrum was mostly about the perceived need for circumcision for God-fearer gentiles. We'll get into that shortly after we re-read the final verses of Acts chapter 10.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 10:28 – end

The final few words of verse 28 have Peter saying that God showed him not to call any man common or unclean. How did God show him this? By means of the vision of the creatures inside a sheet being lowered down from Heaven. I'd like to put the final nail into the coffin of the incorrect doctrinal teaching that the vision had to do with food; that is, I'm saying that this vision was **not** at all about God abrogating the Levitical food laws as is standard Christian doctrine. Rather the vision of the unclean animals was merely symbolic of something else since the vision was essentially a parable. I've made my case on this sufficiently that all I could do is to repeat myself at this point, so I'd like instead to quote to you from a revered early Church Father, the Venerable Bede, an English Monk who lived and wrote about 700 A.D. This excerpt is taken from his commentary on the Book of Acts.

“I am amazed at how some people interpret this as having to do with certain foods that were prohibited by the old law but that are now to be consumed, since neither serpents nor reptiles can be eaten. Nor did Peter himself understand it in this way. Rather he understood it as meaning that all PEOPLE are equally called to the gospel of Christ and that nothing is naturally defiled. For when he was reproached, he explained the SYMBOLISM of this vision, not as giving the reason why he ate beasts but why he associated with gentiles”.

Quite correct; while food was used for symbolism the vision was not about food. So while some might say that when I teach you that the Levitical food laws were not abolished, and that this vision-parable given to Peter certainly didn't do so (because this had nothing to do with food in the first place), it is only because I have a Hebrew Roots or Messianic theology; but here we have a gentile English Christian monk of great repute saying exactly the same thing 1300

years ago and flabbergasted that some of his fellow Christians couldn't see that.

So the bottom line is that Peter is being taught that God does not create anything that is naturally unclean; that is nothing is unclean in its naturally created state. Rather all things begin as ritually clean. So for something to become unclean, something has to happen to it. Now before someone says, 'wait a minute, I thought a vulture for instance was an unclean bird?' No it is not. It is merely a bird that the Lord says is not permitted for food, and thus also for religious purposes such as sacrificing. A vulture is not, of itself, unclean because clean and unclean, versus permitted and prohibited are two entirely different matters that the Torah deals with separately. A vulture is not permitted for food; but it is not inherently unclean.

Further, the God principle is that every created thing is created spiritually common. Common objects and people can remain in the spiritual state of common and clean, or they can be elevated to holy by God's decision. Conversely objects and people that are common and clean can be degraded to unclean (usually by an act of man). But never can a man elevate the common to the holy; that lies purely within the authority of God. What I just told you is perhaps one of the most important God principles there is, and it is clearly stated in the Biblical Torah; that is, this is not Tradition or custom nor is it speculation or allegory.

Paul said the essentially same thing in his own way, and in a slightly different context, in the Book of Romans.

^{CJB} **Romans 14:14** *I know- that is, I have been persuaded by the Lord Yeshua the Messiah- that nothing is unclean in itself. But if a person considers something unclean, then for him it is unclean;*

Here Paul admits that (like Peter) he had to be persuaded by the Lord that nothing is unclean of itself (that is whether it is a person or an object God doesn't create anything unclean). He had to be convinced (have his mind changed) because as a highly trained Pharisee Paul had been taught otherwise. Pharisees (and all of Judaism for that matter) believed that gentiles were, essentially, born as naturally unclean people. Thus another important God principle is at play in our story; it is not important just for Jews but for Believing gentiles as well. When something is unclean, it cannot be made holy. First the unclean thing has to be restored to a spiritual status of clean and common. And then from clean and common God can elevate it to holy.

So notice in this passage of Romans that Paul is talking about a person believing that something is unclean. And if that person believes something is unclean then to him or her it is unclean. But (and here is the kicker) this principle doesn't work the other way around. Paul never says, "Oh yes, and vice versa". He never says that if you believe something is ritually clean, but it is unclean, then for you it is clean. Yet that is usually read into this passage and taught as though that is what he said. I hope you see that. This passage is only dealing with unclean things, not clean.

You see, while there is no danger to us in considering something unclean and therefore we avoid it (even if that object is in reality ritually clean), there **is** danger in assuming something is

clean (when God says the object is actually unclean) and we partake of it anyway. And that is precisely what worried the Jews about coming into contact with gentiles. So the attitude was developed: better safe than sorry. Better to err on the side of considering gentiles and all they contact unclean (and thus avoiding them), than to consider them clean and be wrong, and thus become ritually defiled.

I know this is so hard for us to wrap our minds around, but that is because this thought process has never held a place in gentile Christian life or discussion. For some reason, centuries ago, the spiritual states of clean and unclean have been removed from Christian thought and ideology. But it is Biblical and it is historical and it remains in effect. Gentiles have simply been ignorant of it because it is explained only in the Old Testament. And this ignorance has at times led to gross misunderstanding of some New Testament Scripture passages.

And by the way, Paul is not talking about people, here, as he speaks about considering something as unclean. He is talking about objects, mainly food. How do I know this? Because in the next verse of Romans he says:

^{CJB} **Romans 14:15** *and if your brother is being upset by the food you eat, your life is no longer one of love. Do not, by your eating habits, destroy someone for whom the Messiah died!*

Please follow what I'm about to tell you. If you don't think the Biblical food laws matter, then you probably won't be thrilled by what I have to show you (sometimes the truth is not easy to swallow....forgive the pun). Notice (because this is usually taught backwards) Paul doesn't say "if your brother is upset at the food you **avoid**". That is, this is not about if your fellow Believer is upset because he sees you avoiding foods you think to be unclean. Rather Paul says, 'if your brother is upset by the food you **eat**' (and remember, in the previous verse the context is about considering something **unclean**). Think about it: would a brother ever become upset by the food you eat if he thinks it is clean? Obviously not; so clean food isn't the context. Rather if a fellow Believer sees you eating food that is unclean to him, even though you don't care about following the Biblically kosher food laws, then it is selfish for you to eat food in front of him that to him is unclean (Paul says it is not loving because it is upsetting to him). And yet this verse is typically taught exactly the opposite; instead it is usually taught as Paul saying that if a person considers the food to be clean, then it is the one who considers the food to be unclean that is doing wrong and upsetting his brother. Let me put a finer point on it by giving you an example of how this verse applies. If you come to my house at my invitation for dinner, and I know you observe the Biblical food laws, but I still serve things that I know are unclean to you yet I eat them anyway (even if I don't insist that you do the same), Paul says that is not a loving thing for me to do. It is not you doing wrong because you won't eat the things that I serve you that you consider as unclean; it is me that is wrong for putting you in this uncomfortable position. Romans 14:15 is not about what is avoided; it is about what is eaten. This passage is not about clean food, it is about unclean food. This principle is a one way street and it is always presented in the Bible as a one way street.

In our day and age, what we choose to eat has taken on greater significance not because of scarcity (at least not in the Western world), but because of the issue of maintaining good health

and achieving longer life spans. People, including Believers, care greatly about their diet being organic and healthy, but don't care about whether God says any particular food item should be eaten at all. I can understand this for the secular world; but for Believers? My brethren, God has specifically listed in His Word what is edible as food for us and what is not. The prohibited list is small, and not at all hard to avoid. Your bodily health is of course important and you should endeavor to eat healthy; but your spiritual health is more important and that begins by being obedient to the Lord's commands. No matter, Acts chapter 10 isn't directly about food any way; it is about ritual purity as regards gentiles. Thus in verse 29, after Peter now understands that salvation in Christ is for gentiles, too, and that God does not view gentiles as inherently ritually unclean (and He ought to know), Peter asks Cornelius why he has bid him to come. Cornelius's answer starts in verse 30.

Cornelius recounts about how he too had a vision and it occurred at the hour of the traditional afternoon prayers (traditional for Judaism). And the man in his vision (earlier this man was referred to as an angel) told him to send for Peter, and also told him where Peter was located. So Cornelius was obedient, sent for him, and has gathered friends and family for surely God has something important to say through Peter.

Peter now speaks. And in verse 34 he begins with a humble (and game changing) admission by saying that NOW he fully understands that God is not partial only to Jews, but rather any man from any nation or people who bows down to Him and does what is right (meaning right in God's eyes) is welcome to Him. Peter didn't understand this except within the last 72 hours as a result of the vision-parable God showed him. Up to NOW he did not think it possible that gentiles could be saved in Yeshua's name. Just to be clear: God had not changed anything. It is only that Peter had had it wrong all his life. Gentiles had always had a way to become welcome to God. Christ's atoning death wasn't aimed only at getting Jews into the Kingdom; it was aimed at all people on earth without exception. Christ's death and resurrection explained how the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through Abraham and his Hebrew descendants finally came about.

At verse 36 Peter makes the assumption that Cornelius is well aware of the ritual purity issues between Jews and gentiles, and also is somewhat familiar with the story of Yeshua's life, death and resurrection. Then Peter goes on to summarize the important events of Messiah's life and mission. But let's not miss the underlying tone; Peter is making it clear that salvation first came to the Jews, and now gentiles would hear of this salvation the Jews have as a result of their Jewish Messiah from Jewish witnesses to Christ's life and teachings. Peter emphasizes that point in verse 41 when he says:

^{CJB} Acts 10:41 *not by all the people, but by witnesses God had previously chosen, that is, by us, who ate and drank with him after he had risen again from the dead.*

It was Jews who were the chosen witnesses; in fact it was a select group of Jews among which Peter was one. Thus while Cornelius and other gentile God-fearers are acceptable to God, gentiles should keep in mind that God's Word was given to the Jews 1400 years earlier; the Savior is a Jew; those who know God's Word, and who protect it and tell others about it are Jews; and salvation was first given to the Jews. Thus the Jews hold a place of preeminence

and leadership in the faith, and it is the Jews who were tasked with preaching and testifying about Yeshua; not the gentiles. Paul would say essentially the same thing to begin Romans chapter 3.

Romans 3:1-4 CJB

¹ Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of being circumcised?

² Much in every way! In the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.

³ If some of them were unfaithful, so what? Does their faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness?

⁴ Heaven forbid! God would be true even if everyone were a liar!- as the Tanakh says, "so that you, God, may be proved right in your words and win the verdict when you are put on trial."

But perhaps the most important statement in Peter's talk to Cornelius and his household that shows that Peter really gets what God showed him in his vision, is a statement in verse 43 that forms the foundation for the congregational Body of Christ.

Acts 10:43 CJB ⁴³ *All the prophets bear witness to him, that everyone who puts his trust in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

There is the Gospel of Messiah Yeshua in a nutshell. It is inclusive, it requires trust in Yeshua, and through this will ones' sins be forgiven. I want to say it one more time; while this was a revolutionary concept to Peter, he readily admits that he had had it all wrong up to now and in fact all the OT prophets bore witness to Christ and what His coming would mean for everyone, not just for the Jewish people.

While Peter was still speaking these words, says verse 44, the ***Ruach HaKodesh*** interrupted him and fell on everyone who was listening. What this means is simple; Cornelius's gentile household believed Peter's message, and they believed that Yeshua was Messiah, and they accepted that the Messiah of the Jews was also the Messiah for the gentiles.

But now in verse 45 comes the issue that would prove to be one of the most contentious (and most misunderstood) as regards salvation; the issue of circumcision for gentile males who turned to Messiah Yeshua. We'll talk more about that in a moment, but first notice that the circumcised who were present were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit fell upon this group of gentiles. That one of those gentiles was a Roman army officer was even more astounding since this man was the most visible symbol of Rome's oppression upon God's people. Further these gentiles began speaking in tongues and praising God in ways that no one who didn't know Him intimately could possibly do.

The CJB and others will add the word "faction" or "believers" to the word circumcision; those

words are not there in the original Greek. However in order for this phrase to make sense, something does need to be added to the word circumcision. So who is the Circumcision "faction" referring to? Since this is referring to Jews, naturally they were circumcised, Believer or non-Believer. However we will be told in Acts chapter 11 that it was exactly 6 Jews who went with Peter from Yafo to meet Cornelius. And that these 6 Jews were brethren, meaning they were Believers. So among these 6 Believers who accompanied Peter some of them belonged to a sub-group of Jewish Believers who thought that God-fearers needed to be circumcised if they wanted to worship the God of Israel. And, what was behind this requirement for circumcision was the issue of ritual purity.

However we have to also understand what circumcision meant in that era; it meant that one became an official Jew. A person literally converted from being a gentile to being a Jew. That said, it would be a mischaracterization to say that those who insisted on the circumcision of gentile God-fearers were a separate group (in the same way that Pharisees were a separate group from the Sadducees). Rather they were members of the The Way but they held to a personal conviction that gentile God-fearers should be converted to Jews. Further, this had little to do with a gentile becoming a Believer and follower of Yeshua. That is, the circumcision faction did not come into existence as a result of Christ's advent, and then demand that gentiles convert to Jews in order to be saved. This demand for circumcision was scattered among adherents who belonged to various segments of Judaism, and The Way was (rightfully so) considered as but one of these various segments of Judaism. This circumcision faction had existed long before the time of Christ, because historically Judaism had become rather popular in the Roman Empire and a fair number of gentiles wanted to worship Israel's God.

Thus to these Believers in Yeshua who followed Peter to meet Cornelius, the advent of Christ didn't change anything as far as their perceived need for a gentile God-fearer to convert to Judaism (by means of being circumcised). For them, belief in Christ was the natural path of Judaism; not something different or separate. That is because the same thought process still prevailed: why would a non-Jew worship a Jewish God and adopt a Jewish Savior? For Jews of that day (and up to now, for Peter) the logic was impeccable. By a male gentile God-fearer being circumcised, and thus becoming a Jew, that generally solved the concern about ritual purity. It was going to be a very hard sell, especially for Paul, to get Jewish Believers of the Circumcision faction to relent on the matter of circumcision for gentile Believers; and there has never been much success in that regard to this day.

What we have here with the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius and his household is no less than a second Pentecost event. The first Pentecost event was of course obedient to what Christ said: "First to the Jew, then to the Greek". Thus it was only upon Jews that the Holy Spirit fell in Jerusalem on that very special Biblical Feast day of Shavuot; and they spoke in tongues. Here we have the same thing happen to a group of Greeks (gentiles). To all those present, including those Jews of the circumcision faction, there was simply no denying it because they saw it with their own eyes. Whether they liked it or not, whether they understood it or not, these uncircumcised gentiles had been received by God and the spectacular descending of the Holy Spirit upon them presented undeniable proof.

Peter's response was to immediately ask: is there anything to prohibit these from being

immersed? It reminds one of the Ethiopian eunuch who, upon accepting Yeshua as Savior, asked Philip if there was anything that should prevent him from being baptized. So it is not that Cornelius was the first gentile to be baptized or to receive the Holy Spirit. It is that Peter, the head of the Body of Believers at this time, now realizes that this handful of isolated cases of gentiles coming to belief, receiving the Holy Spirit and being baptized, would not be unique but rather it would become the norm.

Interestingly we hear of no protest from the Circumcision faction. And we hear of no demand or expectation that Cornelius and his household would be circumcised. But as with so many long held traditions and beliefs, no matter how misguided, they don't easily change or die. Thus circumcision of gentile Believers is going to become, and remain, a stubborn issue within The Way for the remainder of the New Testament.

It seems to have been left to Paul to do more than merely declare that circumcision of gentiles was not needed to be accepted Christ worshippers; he would be the one to have to explain the theology behind it. And once again let me point out that for Jews of this era, circumcision wasn't merely an issue of following a traditional ritual or a cultural custom. Rather, circumcision meant one thing and one thing only: that one was, or was becoming, a Jew. And with circumcision, one didn't just become a Jew symbolically, nor was it a means to show sympathy or solidarity with the Jewish people. One literally became a national Jewish citizen, and would no longer identify as a gentile.

Paul dealt with the matter of circumcision of gentiles from the most important aspect, the spiritual aspect, in Romans chapter 2. Let's close with what he said about it.

Romans 2:13-29 CJB

¹³ For it is not merely the hearers of Torah whom God considers righteous; rather, it is the doers of what Torah says who will be made righteous in God's sight.

¹⁴ For whenever Gentiles, who have no Torah, do naturally what the Torah requires, then these, even though they don't have Torah, for themselves are Torah!

¹⁵ For their lives show that the conduct the Torah dictates is written in their hearts. Their consciences also bear witness to this, for their conflicting thoughts sometimes accuse them and sometimes defend them

¹⁶ on a day when God passes judgment on people's inmost secrets. (According to the Good News as I proclaim it, he does this through the Messiah Yeshua.)

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rest on Torah and boast about God

¹⁸ and know his will and give your approval to what is right, because you have been instructed from the Torah;

¹⁹ and if you have persuaded yourself that you are a guide to the blind, a light in the

darkness,

²⁰ an instructor for the spiritually unaware and a teacher of children, since in the Torah you have the embodiment of knowledge and truth;

²¹ then, you who teach others, don't you teach yourself? Preaching, "Thou shalt not steal," do you steal?

²² Saying, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? Detesting idols, do you commit idolatrous acts?

²³ You who take such pride in Torah, do you, by disobeying the Torah, dishonor God?-

²⁴ as it says in the Tanakh, "For it is because of you that God's name is blasphemed by the Goyim."

²⁵ For circumcision is indeed of value if you do what Torah says. But if you are a transgressor of Torah, your circumcision has become uncircumcision!

²⁶ Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the Torah, won't his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

²⁷ Indeed, the man who is physically uncircumcised but obeys the Torah will stand as a judgment on you who have had a b'rit-milah and have Torah written out but violate it!

²⁸ For the real Jew is not merely Jewish outwardly: true circumcision is not only external and physical.

²⁹ On the contrary, the real Jew is one inwardly; and true circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal; so that his praise comes not from other people but from God.

What did we just hear Paul say? He says true circumcision is of the heart; spiritually not literally. So fleshly circumcision was always meant as an outward symbol of something that happened internally and invisibly. He also said that the man who obeys the Torah but is physically not circumcised (he is a gentile, not a Jew) will stand as a judgment against a Jew (a circumcised person) who disobeys God's Torah. Circumcision was a physical symbol that anyone could wear whether they trusted and obeyed the God of Israel or not. But a man who didn't wear that physical symbol of circumcision (a gentile), but did trust God and did obey God's Torah, God would declare as righteous and acceptable.

We'll begin Acts chapter 11 next time.