

Acts Series Part 28

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 January 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 00] The prejudice was a very big question, and I suspect all of us would have to respond affirmatively in one way or another. We are all prejudiced, be that in an extreme way or in a milder way.
- A story is told, and as I understand it, it's true, about C.S. Lewis when he was a small boy of six or seven, and brilliant man that he was.
- He was brilliant at that age also, and on one day he very confidently declared to his father the following. He said, Daddy, I have a prejudice against the French.
- Now his father was intrigued by this, and he asked him, Why? And the precocious young boy responded, If I knew that, it wouldn't be a prejudice. And, of course, he was quite right in the answer he gave to his father.
- Well, in the passage before us this evening, Peter is told in verse 20 the following, or is given the following instruction.
- [1 : 13] We read there in verse 20 of Acts chapter 10, So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them. And the reference is to the servants of the Gentile, Cornelius, who was calling for Peter.
- Now these words that are translated, Do not hesitate to go with them, are much debated as to the best way of translating the words. And certainly, Do not hesitate to go with them is a valid and a legitimate translation.
- But others suggest that the idea here is something along the lines of, Make no distinction and go with them. Or, more loosely, don't be prejudiced.
- Don't not go with them just because who they are, Gentiles. Don't hesitate to go to the home of Cornelius because of who he is, a Gentile.
- Don't hesitate. Make no distinction. Don't be prejudiced. You have been called to go, and I, and God is speaking, am telling you that you should go. Don't hesitate to go.
- [2 : 21] Now in this passage and in this vision that Peter is given, a lot more is being tackled than simply the matter of crude cultural or racial prejudices that we can all be prey to.
- But certainly the danger of prejudice as a barrier to gospel expansion is a theme and can be a practical application of the passage for ourselves.
- Well, let's consider Peter's vision that we've read in Acts chapter 10, and we want to consider it in the following way by simply posing a number of questions concerning the vision.
- And from the passage before us, trying to find answers to these questions. I'll tell you what the questions are, and then we can go through them one by one.
- The first question concerning this vision is, who is speaking? There is a voice that speaks to Peter, and we want to discover, well, who is it that is speaking?
- [3 : 26] Now, I'm posing that as a question, but in my second question, I'm giving the answer, because the second question is, to whom does God speak? So I'm kind of getting ahead of myself in answering the first question, but bear with me on that.

The second question then, to whom does God speak? The third question we want to answer is, how does He speak? Then we want to go on and ask, what does He say? And then the next question, possibly the most important one, is, what does it mean, this message that is given?

What does it mean? And then finally, how does Peter respond to the vision that he has given? First of all then, who is speaking? Now, it's very evident that the vision and the message that it brings comes from God.

And yet, it is instructive, interesting to note the language used to describe the one who is speaking. First of all, in verse 13, when we are first able to identify some information in this regard, we're simply told, then a voice told him.

The vision is there, visible, obviously, to Peter, but then there's a voice. We read there, then a voice told him, get up, Peter, kill. And eat.

[4 : 45] But this voice isn't identified. A voice from heaven, commenting on the vision, but simply we're told it's a voice. But then in verse 14, we have Peter responding to the voice.

And there we are given more insight as to who is speaking. Because then in verse 14, Peter responds, surely not, Lord. So, he's been told to kill the animals that are on this blanket.

And in a moment, we'll explain the significance of that. But he's given this instruction, and he responds by saying, surely not, Lord. Now, we read that, and we say, well, it's very clear that Jesus is speaking.

However, it is true that the word that is used, the word Lord, was a word, a title, if you wish, that could be used for anybody in authority. And so, if you were to address somebody in a respectful manner, this would be an appropriate title.

And so, some would argue that this in itself doesn't really give us the answer to our question, that Peter, on hearing a voice from heaven, something that clearly was out of the ordinary, somebody who clearly had a measure of authority, this would be the appropriate way for him to respond.

[6 : 02] And yet, I wonder, and I suggest that we can reasonably presume that this voice that Peter hears was in actual fact a voice that Peter recognized, that this was a voice that Peter knew so well, that this was indeed the voice of his Lord, and that he was able to recognize the voice.

Yes, Jesus has ascended into heaven, and he's at the right hand of the Father, and in his glorified body. And yet, we have no reason to think that the voice that he had was materially different to the voice that he had had when he was walking in Galilee and in Jerusalem.

And so, it seems reasonable to presume that Peter actually recognized the voice, that this was the voice of Jesus, whom he knew so well.

And so, he responds, Surely not, Lord. Not the first time he had responded to Jesus in this way. In the course of walking with Jesus, there had been more than one occasion when Peter had been surprised and reluctant to follow the Lord's instructions.

And once again, we find him responding in a similar way. Surely not, Lord. Then, to add further intrigue or food for thought, we read in verse 19.

[7 : 27] We're at the moment thinking about this question, Who is speaking? Then in verse 19, we read as follows. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, so the vision has been given, the accompanying words of explanation have been pronounced, and now Peter is thinking about the vision.

And then we read, The Spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you, and there are further instructions. And we would ask the question, Is the Lord, to whom Peter addresses himself in verse 14, is he to be identified with the Spirit who is spoken of here?

The Spirit said to him, Simon, and what follows. That's possible, but I think a different and more plausible explanation is along these lines.

In the vision that Peter has, and in the words that accompany the vision, you have what you might call direct communication by God to Peter.

A direct communication by which God authoritatively presents to Peter new revelation. Now, having received this vision, having seen this vision, having heard the accompanying words of explanation, Peter has to ponder on its significance.

[8 : 50] He has to consider what it means, and that's what he's doing at this point. And in this process of considering what the vision means, in considering perhaps the implications of this vision.

The Spirit aids him, and helps him, and brings him to a point of understanding, and of grasping the implications of the vision.

There is in the part of the Spirit, in the words that we have in verse 19 and 20, no new revelation, but rather the Spirit is helping Peter to come to grips with the meaning of the vision, and the accompanying words of the vision.

How did the Spirit speak to him? Well, everything would suggest that there was an audible voice that is heard, and that, of course, seems unusual to us. But it's difficult to escape from the conclusion that these were audible words, particularly given the detail we have.

There in verse 19, the Spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you. Some, as they consider these words, say, well, what is being described here is the manner in which the Spirit helps Peter to come to an inward conviction concerning what he should do.

[10 : 08] Now, certainly the Spirit is doing that. But the suggestion being that there need not have been an audible voice that was heard by Peter. Well, that may be, but as I say, the detail in the communication does suggest that this was something, for us certainly, extraordinary in the manner in which the Spirit speaks to Peter.

Nonetheless, the point holds that what the Spirit is saying is not new revelation, but rather helping Peter understand the vision and its implications.

So it is God who is speaking. It is Jesus who is reconnecting, as it were, with Peter and bringing him this very important news, new revelation that will have very significant implications for the extension of his church.

Now, as we think of the manner of God speaking to Peter, we are very clear that we are not to expect that God would bring to us new revelation in the sense that Peter was accorded this privilege, but also responsibility to receive this revelation.

But what is true is that with Peter, we should be sensitive to the voice of the Spirit of God as he speaks to us, helping us to apply the revelation he has given to us, as he helps us understand the implications of the truths that we have recorded for us in the Scriptures.

[11 : 49] In that regard, our need is as great as Peter's need for the help of the Spirit. So, God is speaking in this vision, and he continues to speak by his Spirit in helping Peter understand the vision.

And to whom does he speak? Well, this seems an even more obvious question or obvious answer, and there is, of course, no great mystery here. He is speaking to Simon Peter.

But the one thing I want to say, and the reason for even posing what seems such a self-evident question, the one thing I want to highlight is the manner in which God speaks to one who is listening.

And we find a parallel with Cornelius, whom we had met last week. When was it that God granted a vision to Cornelius and spoke to Cornelius?

Well, we are told it is when he was praying to God. And as he seeks God, as he prays to God, it is in that context and in that moment that God comes to his encounter and speaks to him.

[12 : 57] And we have the same pattern here with Peter. We are told there in verse 9, Peter went up on the roof to pray. And it is as he is praying that God speaks to him.

And there is surely a simple but important lesson for us there. There is a pattern that I think we can learn from as we seek God.

So we are likely to hear God. God, of course, is able to speak to us even when we make no effort to speak to him. God is able, if he so chooses, to interrupt into lives that have no concern and no thought for God.

That is his prerogative and that is something he is well able to do. But the pattern that we find in Scriptures, and particularly those of us who by grace have come to know God by faith in Jesus Christ, if we want to hear his voice, if we want to hear him speaking to us and directing us and guiding us, then the onus is on us with Cornelius and with Peter to be seeking his face and praying to him.

How does he speak? Well, he speaks in a vision. We might ask, why a vision? Why this manner of communication? Again, perhaps for us this seems quite an alien medium for communicating a truth.

[14 : 24] And we can maybe stab at an answer to the question, why God chose to use a vision? Perhaps the transcendence of the truth being conveyed in part explains the manner in which it is conveyed.

Now, we have yet to consider the meaning of the vision, but it is clear that this is a highly significant matter, one on which the future of the church depends.

Indeed, we might say in the absence of this vision, or in any case, in the absence of God's purpose expressed by this vision, we would probably not be here today.

It is that significant. And so perhaps, given the significance of the matter being addressed, God chooses to use this special, extraordinary way of communicating His truth.

As to the vision itself, and I don't want to really spend much time on this, but it's of anecdotal, perhaps, interest to think about how commentators have great fun, really, speculating as to what factors might have influenced Peter or contributed to the vision that he sees.

[15 : 45] Some lay great store on the fact that he was hungry, and we're explicitly told there in verse 10, he became hungry and wanted something to eat. And so it's suggested that his hunger, in a way, contributes to the content of the vision.

It's in no way denying that the vision comes from God, but that somehow his hunger also contributed to him seeing this vision that actually involves eating. At some point, to the fact that he's, at midday, gone to the roof of the house that he is staying in.

Now in the Mediterranean midday sun, you can imagine the heat that he would have likely been experiencing, and that somehow this also could have predisposed him, even physically, to this kind of experience.

Even the content of the vision as to the blanket coming down from heaven. Some suggest, well, indeed, given the midday sun, there could well have been some kind of awning on the roof to protect him from it.

And that as he enters into this vision-like state, if you wish, this contributed also, this awning, became part of the vision of the blanket coming down from heaven.

[16 : 55] Some even say that he's looking over the Mediterranean Sea, and there are sailing ships passing by, and the white sails also somehow contribute to Peter having this particular vision.

Now these things really are not of great importance, and while not discounting that God could have used one or more of these factors, it's also true that we have, of course, no difficulty in simply recognizing that God granted Peter this vision in an entirely supernatural way to convey the message that he needed to convey.

And what does God say? Moving on to the next question. What does He say? What is the content of the vision? Well, we have that in the passage read, and the picture is clearly presented for us.

As to the visual element, there is the sheet that contains the animals described there in verse 11. And it would seem that in, I suppose, the biblical categories of animals that I don't think are intended to be scientific categories, but categories nonetheless, the three fundamental categories are actually mentioned there.

The four-footed animals, the reptiles, and the birds. And these same categories we find, interestingly, at the very beginning of the Scriptures in Genesis chapter 6 and verse 20.

[18 : 41] And we can just notice that very briefly in Genesis chapter 6 and verse 20 in the context of the account concerning the flood, we read that of those that were to be in the ark, two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal, and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground, you will come to you to be kept alive.

And again, you have these three categories of birds, reptiles, and of mammals, I suppose, would be a word that we could use. And the point being that all kinds of animals, all manner of animals or creatures were to be found on this blanket.

None were excluded. Now, that's not to say that exhaustively every single animal, but every kind of animal, all the categories understood are found on the blanket that is coming down from heaven.

And in the context of the dietary laws that we find in Leviticus chapter 11, that necessarily would have included clean animals and unclean animals.

Those animals that God had determined within the Mosaic law were fit for human consumption or certainly fit for consumption by the people of Israel and those that were not.

[20 : 04] God had authoritatively declared those that were clean and those that were unclean. And clearly, on this blanket, both categories are to be found.

Well, the visual aid, the vision itself is dramatic, but the words that accompany the vision are more dramatic and certainly more shocking for Peter. Peter is told, get up, kill, and eat.

Now, this injunction on the part of God was clearly a command to do that which was prohibited by the Mosaic law that Peter was very loyal to and rightly so as a God-fearing Jew.

And so, he was being told clearly and explicitly to break the law that he had always understood to be unbreakable, to be God-given law.

And indeed, we have, perhaps for this very reason, because it was so shocking and so scandalous for him, we have this threefold repetition of this instruction.

[21 : 11] The repetition may be in part a function of his incredulity. And because he has so much difficulty in accepting this, so God grants him three occasions to be very clear as to what is being asked of him or what he has been told to do.

And certainly, the threefold repetition would have avoided any danger of subsequent questioning if this is what God had actually said. Maybe I heard wrong.

Maybe it wasn't like that. Maybe it was a wee bit different. No. Three times the same message is given. Difficult though it is for Peter to understand. Well, this is the content, if you wish, of the vision and of the words that accompany it.

But it brings us on to perhaps what is most important for us and that, what does it mean? What does this vision mean? Just a very brief general point before tackling the precise meaning.

And the general point is this, that this vision of the blanket and of the animals and the instruction to kill and eat that which the Mosaic law forbade illustrates God's prerogative to change his law according to his purposes and in the way and time by him appointed.

[22 : 30] The instructions of Leviticus chapter 11 that time doesn't allow us to read but they're simply the summary or the totality of the food or dietary laws, these instructions are God's instructions.

And no mere man could dare a question or change them. But God can. And this is, I think, partly the import of what God says in verse 15.

God is establishing his authority before Peter. When Peter protests that this is something he could not do, what does God say in verse 15? Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

I am God. And if that which I have declared in the past as unclean, I now declare as clean, well, that is my prerogative. I have that authority. And I am telling you, I am declaring that yes, in the past these animals were considered and I determined that they be considered unclean, but no longer.

And that is my prerogative. I have that authority to do this. Now, we do have to be a little bit careful here in recognizing that we understand that there are laws revealed by God, what we ordinarily describe as the moral law as it is summarized in the Ten Commandments, that so reflect God's character that any change in these laws is inconceivable.

[23 : 57] That is not because God lacks any authority, but simply that God cannot contradict Himself. And if these laws reflect who He is, then these are laws that we cannot conceive of as being subject to change.

But the dietary laws essentially serve to distinguish the Israelites from other nations. I think we could probably safely declare that that was their primary purpose.

God, for reasons that He had, wished to distinguish His people from the other nations. And He did that in different ways. But one of the ways was by these dietary laws.

You are different and that will be illustrated by even the diet that you have. Others will eat these things, but not you. And so in this way, the message is declared that you are a different people.

There is a sense in which also in which these laws served as a challenge to their covenant loyalty. That the people would say, well, we are not to eat.

[25 : 03] Why not? Because God has said so. And people might say, but that's a silly law. There's nothing wrong with this. This is good food. God has said so. And so we have to obey our God. Maybe we don't know the reasons why, but God has said, we are not to eat, so we will not eat.

And so in a sense, they served as a means of the people demonstrating their loyalty to God and their obedience to God.

But these were laws that though God had indeed established them, had a specific and time-limited function. And that God is now saying, eat to Peter, when he had previously said, don't eat, is not to be understood as God changing his mind.

There was a time to not eat and there is now a time to eat. It is a question, if you wish, of timing. Maybe I could illustrate this in the following way.

Imagine a mother with her small child at a road crossing. And the mother says to the small child, stay still. And then just a moment later, the mother says to the child, walk across.

[26 : 11] Now if you wanted to be pedantic, you could say, well these are contradictory instructions. On the one hand, she is telling the poor child to stay still and then she is telling the child to walk across. But of course we know that the mother isn't contradicting herself, just that given the timing of when she says what she says, there is a time when it is altogether appropriate for her to say to the child, stay still.

But then there comes a time when it is altogether appropriate without any contradiction for the mother to say walk across. And so equally with these kinds of laws, there was a time in God's purpose for these laws.

And they are God's laws and we should have no embarrassment in recognizing that they are indeed God's laws. And there are laws in the Old Testament and the Mosaic Code that we do have difficulty.

And the punishments associated with breaking some of these laws they produce ethical problems for us. And yet we do not have embarrassment in recognizing that this indeed was what God determined.

But also, the nature of these laws were such that God had the authority in due time to change these laws and in this case to abrogate these particular dietary laws.

[27 : 29] laws. But moving on to the meaning of the vision and the accompanying words. Now, the immediate and direct meaning of the vision is quite simply the abrogation of the dietary laws.

The laws that God had established through Moses of those things that the people of Israel could eat and those things that they should not eat. With this vision, God is saying these laws no longer apply.

Now, this has been anticipated by the teaching of Jesus. If we read in Mark's Gospel in chapter 7 and verses 18 and 19, we can notice that this is something that Jesus has, you might even argue, already established, certainly anticipated.

There in verse 17 of chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel, we read, After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull, he asked?

Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his heart, but into his stomach and then out of his body. And then we have an interesting editorial comment.

[28 : 38] Not something that Jesus said, but we have this editorial comment on the part of Mark and we read, In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. Now, I think it's very plausible that that editorial comment has as its source Peter.

That Peter, who participated to provide information for Mark for his Gospel, was the one, actually, who explained this to Mark. We don't know that for sure, but it seems very plausible in the light of this passage in particular.

That Peter, as he looks back on what Jesus said, he says, Ah, yes, now I understand. So, in any case, Jesus had anticipated this change that God had determined.

Is there more being taught? Very clearly, there is this being taught, that these dietary laws no longer hold. And we might say, well, that's of little interest perhaps to us 2,000 years down the road.

But is more being taught? Well, clearly, more is being taught. The abrogation of the dietary laws by, if you wish, implication or necessary consequence also removed the prohibition on fellowship with the Gentiles and ultimately removes all requirements that the Gentiles become Jews in order to become part of the family of God, in order to become Christians in the context of the New Testament.

[30 : 07] Now, that this is a necessary implication of the abrogation of the dietary laws is confirmed or certainly substantiated by what God goes on to say to Peter when he protests about killing and eating.

In verse 15, the voice spoke to him a second time, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. And there it's more general. He doesn't say, don't call any food unclean that I've made clean.

He simply says, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. And so, there's an opening out, as it were, of the implications of this vision, that it's not only about food.

It is also about God's purposes for Jew and Gentile alike that all are welcome, that all are able to experience God's cleansing, not only Jew, but Gentile also.

and so more is indeed being taught. Some see the vision as a parable, or essentially a parable teaching this more fundamental truth with regard to the place of the Gentiles.

[31 : 20] But I think it's preferable to take the vision at face value, that it teaches in the first instance the abrogation of the dietary laws, but that there are these necessary implications of that for much more important and fundamental matters.

as regards the place of the Gentiles in God's purposes. Now in the event, in the account we have, Peter is forced to come to grips with the implications of the vision immediately with the arrival of the servants of Cornelius.

He has this vision that tells him that the dietary laws no longer hold very well, but then suddenly these servants come and say, you've got to come and visit this Gentile. And so very immediately Peter is forced to say, well, let me just get my head around this.

Okay, I can see what's happening here. This vision obviously has something to do with these men coming and calling me to the house of this Gentile Cornelius. And we've noted already that the Spirit is helping him in this process of understanding and processing the meaning and the implications of the vision.

And obviously it's so clear that the arrival of these servants sent by Cornelius is timed by God to coincide with the vision.

[32 : 34] And so there is huge significance in this vision. Not only an in-house Jewish matter concerning what you can eat or what you can't eat, but the opening of the doors of the kingdom, the opening of the doors to belong to the family of God, to all without distinction, Jew and Gentile.

None are excluded. None are kept at arms' length. Finally, how does Peter respond? Very briefly. Well, there's a progression in Peter's response to the vision.

He begins by resisting. And that resistance is perhaps more significant if we assume, as we have done, that he had actually recognized the Lord's voice.

And though we could criticize him for resisting it, it is understandable. He's being asked to do something that goes completely against the grain, something that he could never in his wildest imaginations have conceived that God would ask him to do.

And so, he has difficulty and he resists. He says, Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. But not only does he begin by resisting, he then, helpfully, or quite positively, moves on to ponder and to consider what this means.

[34 : 00] We read in verse 17 when Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision. Then in verse 19, while Peter was thinking about the vision, he's pondering, he's thinking, he's considering. What does this mean? He's struggling with it.

Difficult though this revelation is, he can't ignore it. He must come to an understanding of what it means. He goes on to struggle with his prejudices.

Hence the need for him to be told in verse 20, something we noted at the very beginning. Do not hesitate to go with them. Make no distinction. Don't be prejudiced. Go with them. Yes, they're Gentiles.

But you go with them. Don't treat them any differently than if they had been Jews coming to visit you. Make no distinction. And so he struggles with his prejudice. Presumably Peter shared the views expressed in chapter 11 and verse 3 when he is criticized for what he had done there in verse 3 of chapter 11.

He is challenged. You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. That was the opinion of those who challenged him. But in all probability that was his own opinion before this vision.

[35 : 08] So he struggles with that. Now, it is important just very briefly to note that Peter would not have had a problem in principle with Gentiles becoming Christians.

Indeed, in the Old Testament, the door was open for Gentiles to become part of God's people. The problem Peter would have had would have been with the manner in which they could become Christians.

For Peter, the only way they could have become Christians would have been by becoming Jews first, or in any case, in parallel and being circumcised. And only then was it possible that they could be Christians.

And this is the paradigm, if you wish. This is the misconception that is being shattered by this vision. God is declaring that this is not necessary. Now, as we think of ourselves and what applications this can have, we can consider this and say, well, it may be of some theological interest to us, but it doesn't really seem to have much to say to us today.

And I think it's true that there are, if you wish, no direct parallels with what Peter was being asked to do and what God might ask us to do today. But nonetheless, the principle of recognizing that God is not bound to always work as we see fit or in the manner that we are accustomed to hold, that principle that we should be careful not to tie God down as to how He should work and the manner in which He should grow His church.

[36 : 43] God can do an old thing in a new way and be careful lest we resist His will. And let us try, difficult though it is, to examine what prejudices we might have that hold us back from reaching out to those God has determined to bring into His family.

So Peter, he resists, he ponders, he considers, he struggles, but finally, and finally not only about Peter, but finally for ourselves this evening, he obeys.

He obeys. In verse 21, Peter went down and said to the men, I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come? And his obedience is to be commended because in these words he clearly still doesn't fully understand.

The order of the word seems a bit peculiar. I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come? If you know that I'm the one, then surely you know why the men have come. But no, he's still puzzled.

He's still, in a measure, confused. But what he is clear is that God has said that he must receive these men and go with these men and go, as it were, stepping into the dark in great measure, but in obedience to God.

[37 : 52] And he does. He obeys. And he does so, it would seem, graciously and enthusiastically, even the gracious hospitality that he offers to the men. And presumably the day is concluding and there's no possibility of making the journey from Joppa to Caesarea and the time that remains, and so it's necessary for these men to remain and enjoy the hospitality of Peter and indeed of Peter's host.

And so that is what is done to then, presumably, first thing in the morning to then go on their journey to Caesarea. So Peter obeys.

And what is the result of Peter's obedience? Well, much a blessing for the household of Cornelius and indeed for all Gentiles that would follow and make their entry into the people of God and that includes, I think we can safely say, all of us here who are not Jews.

We are where we are thanks to the truth that this vision declared. But more of that on another occasion as we would continue to study what continues in this chapter.

Well, let's bow our heads in prayer.