

Acts 10

Aim of Lesson

To show that God's love and his offer of salvation extend to people of all nationalities and from all walks of life.

Background study

Leviticus 11; Mark 16:15-16; John 3:3-7.

Suggested outline of lesson

Instead of introducing Cornelius at the start of the lesson, it might prove useful to begin with the account of Peter's bewildering vision. Point out that what he saw appeared to contradict the laws that he had so carefully observed all his life. Describe the design of a building that allowed for access to the flat roof - a quiet and suitable place for meditation and prayer. The demands made upon Peter at this time were very heavy and, following the example of Jesus, he withdrew himself from his friends to pray and meditate alone. Peter had received much guidance from the Lord, but this vision puzzled and disturbed him. The idea of killing and eating snakes, vultures, bats, crocodiles (Leviticus 11) and other such creatures would have filled him with horror. The children will no doubt share Peter's revulsion, in some measure, although his feeling was born of adherence to divine instruction rather than mere natural disinclination. The repeated statement: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common", ran through his mind again and again as he tried to understand its meaning. It would seem to him that he was being instructed to break the law.

God's timing was perfect. As Peter awoke, still puzzled by what he had seen, some Gentile visitors arrived at the house. God left Peter in no doubt about what to do and instructed him to accompany these men. Remind the children that Peter was a Jew, with a deep-rooted prejudice against the Gentiles and who honestly thought that salvation was offered only to the Jews. (The Jews called the Gentiles "dogs", and would never enter their houses or eat with them - they considered them to be "unclean"). In order to widen Peter's horizons and to show him that the gospel was for anyone who would hear and obey, God had spoken to him in a spectacular way. Peter must have learned the lesson quickly and accepted God's guidance because he "called them in" to be his guests. He, a Jew, was entertaining Gentiles.

Describe Peter welcoming the visitors and relate the experience of Cornelius as it would be told to Peter. Spend a little time talking about the Romans and their impact on the Palestine of Peter's day. Point out the relatively important position of Cornelius in the Roman army (today his position would be equivalent to that of a captain), and the remarkable fact that he and his family had turned away from the idols worshipped by the Romans, to worship the God of the Jews. Sincerely wanting to please God, Cornelius had prayed regularly and had given generously to those in need. Such actions do not go unnoticed in heaven. God had sent an angel to give Cornelius an important message, which had led to the visit of his servants to the house where Peter was staying.

The more Peter learned about Cornelius and the intervention of God in his life, the more clearly he understood the significance of his vision on the rooftop. He realized that it was God's will that he should go with the men, and he accompanied them willingly to the home of the Roman centurion.

Cornelius had gathered together his friends and relations, and they were eagerly awaiting Peter's arrival. They felt that something momentous was about to happen. Cornelius was so honoured to receive Peter that he fell down at his feet as if to worship him. Peter's reply proved how much he had learned since the vision. The way of salvation was open to Jew and Gentile alike. Show how gladly and enthusiastically Peter talked to these Gentiles about the Lord Jesus, drawing on their experiences of the happenings of the last three days. When Peter, and the other disciples, saw that Cornelius and his family had received the Holy Spirit, there was no longer any doubt in his mind that "in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable". He baptized them gladly in the name of the Lord.

Salvation is offered to all men, and we who are Gentiles give thanks to God that he has provided the opportunity for us to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Relevance to the children's lives

What lesson did Peter learn in this story? Can we learn a similar lesson? You may wish to develop a discussion about some of the different kinds of prejudice which exist, and which the children may have experienced, e.g. intellectual, colour, status, physical differences etc., and give the children guidelines for overcoming prejudice.

Worksheets

Something to remember: 'Jesus Christ is Lord of all'.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we are glad that you love and care for us, no matter whether we are rich or poor, strong or weak or whatever the colour of our skin. Help us not to be unkind to those who are different from ourselves. Amen.

Memory verse

"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).