

Bible Reading Challenge 44: THE CHURCH – TO THE GENTILES

We ended last week's reading with the gospel spreading out from Jerusalem as a result of the shocking death of Stephen. The Christians were shocked, that is; not God. It was all part of His plan, and today we come to another part. Or not just a "part," but a whole era. What happens in these chapters is *huge*, because the Holy Spirit is going to knock down the door that has separated Jews and Gentiles for centuries.

Who is a Gentile? Most of us who are reading along in this Bible Challenge are Gentiles. Jews, at that time, were physical descendants of Abraham, God's special people, and Gentiles were everybody outside that circle. The relationship between Jews and Gentiles was cool, distant, or downright hostile. Jews might do business with Gentiles, but most Jews wouldn't think of marrying a Gentile, or worshipping with them, or even eating with them. But this wasn't God's long-term plan. In the early days He forbade marriage between the Israelites and the surrounding nations, but that was because the Israelites would adopt foreign idol-worship. Which of course they did. But God promised Abraham that *all* nations would be blessed through him, not just Israelites. Gentiles like Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman had been blessed, but not the nations as a whole. That's the next big step in the gospel plan, and it starts now, through a man named Cornelius.

Notice that the story of Cornelius is told twice—actually two and a half times, if you count Cornelius's own half. The emphasis shows its importance in Bible history. But consider the author: Luke was most likely a Gentile himself, and he understands on a very personal level what God is doing. Cornelius was a "God-fearer": someone who worshipped the true God but was not circumcised and couldn't call himself a Jew. As you'll find out, Peter didn't feel entirely comfortable about associating with such people. But Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom (Matt. 16:19), which included the responsibility of unlocking this door. Once it was open, the young man Saul—now called Paul—stormed through.

There are two other milestones this week: one is the establishment of the first missionary center outside Jerusalem, in Antioch of Syria. Two is the name given to followers of Jesus Christ—a mocking term, but one they've proudly accepted ever since.

Reading for this week: Acts 10-11; 13-15; Galatians 1:11-2:16

Further passages: Genesis 12:13, Amos 9:11-12, Eph. 2:11-22

Key verse: "But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as [the Gentiles] will." Acts 15:11

Questions to Think and Talk about:

1. Did God send Peter to Cornelius because Cornelius was a good man?
2. What does it mean that Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit in Acts 11:17?
3. Find and mark all references to the Holy Spirit in these chapters (I found nine). What does He do?
4. Where did Paul and Barnabas go first in every new city? Why? (See 14:46) Who gave them the most trouble and why?
5. What's the most important sentence in Paul's sermon of Acts 13?
6. What was the first major issue confronting the church? (see 15:15) How was it resolved? How does Paul speak of it in Galatians? What great principle came out of this meeting? (See 15:11)
7. What is the "yoke" Peter speaks of in 15:10-11? Why does he say that "neither we nor our fathers" were able to bear it?

Activities:

- Pretend you're a news reporter assigned to cover Paul's first missionary trip. Write short reports from each town (such as Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe).
- List the unclean animals named in Leviticus 11:2-47 and include some of them in a drawing of Peter's vision.
- In Acts 11:17 Peter defends his baptizing Cornelius by insisting he could not stand in the way of the Holy Spirit. Discuss and list some things that may stand in the way of the Holy Spirit today.