

9. The Life and Ministry of Peter

9.10 Still learning while serving (Acts 10:1-48)

Those few years following Peter's call had seen many changes in his life. Now he was a fisher of men not a fisherman. He followed Christ and did not follow himself. He feared God rather than brashly being afraid of nothing or no one. God had helped him to preach and 3000 were saved. God led him to heal and the man leaped in praise. He had confronted Ananias and Sapphira, and sin was purged from the young church. He aimed for a life of prayer and the ministry of the word (6:4); he was called, he was used, he was a leader. He was an authority on the life of Jesus and people looked to him for answers, but he was still humbly learning lessons from God himself day by day.

I am sure we can all identify with God's servant in Acts 10:10 in that we become hungry and want something to eat! Can we also identify with him in still being teachable after many months in the ministry? Let us see how God teaches those who want to learn from him. From the two main characters of the story we will see how they *sought* God and God *showed* himself to them.

Cornelius sought God

He was a centurion in the Italian regiment based in Caesarea. His daily job was to put down any riots or rebellion among the Jews. He did not live a sheltered life and was probably in the thick of any nasty business going on. He was a family man and his wife and children seemed to be with him in what he was doing. He was a devout, God-fearing man. He lived his life conscious that the eye of God was on him. He was a generous man, not abusing his position but using it to serve God. He was a praying man who set aside regular time each day to talk with God. Cornelius is an example of a man who sought and found God.

What God did for Cornelius

Firstly, God gave him a *vision* (v.3). It was a definite experience, recorded by the meticulous Dr Luke, and it was distinct, leaving no room for doubt on his part or by his servants or colleagues. It was also a divine vision.

Secondly, God gave him a *voice* recorded in verses 3-6. God knew his name. God had seen his deeds. God was now giving him a command. If he obeyed, Cornelius would find the fulfilment of his life seeking after God. Finally, God gave him a *different view* towards the Jews. As a Gentile he would not normally have had much to do with the Jews voluntarily, but God's call to him overcame these preconceived ideas. God was clearing the barriers away so that his purpose could be worked out.

What God did for Peter (vv.9-23)

Here we see the same three things. God gave him a *vision*. It was a deliberate attempt by God to get the experienced apostle to learn something new about God's work. Peter was prepared for this by his own prayer and his own position. God gave him a *voice* which immediately made Peter very cautious. The sheet contained many animals and birds that the Jews were instructed not to eat, yet the voice was actually calling him to 'kill and eat'. Peter's mind was being renewed. God by his Holy Spirit was striving for Peter's spiritual growth. Peter did not dismiss it - he wondered about it, long and hard. God gave him a *different view* (v.28). The lesson on the plate led to the greater lesson about people. Peter was definite when he said: 'God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.'

Peter goes God's way

Peter wondered about what God had said. He was listening to God and learning from him. He went where God told him to go. In his testimony he recalls that he had 'no hesitation about going with them' (Acts 11:12). Peter watched what God did (Acts 10:44-46). God demonstrated his love for the Gentiles, and for Cornelius in particular, by pouring out his Holy Spirit upon the group as Peter preached Christ. Peter's willingness led others into this truth too. Criticism from other believers came Peter's way almost immediately, but Peter countered it with clear and concise personal testimony. God was praised for his work among the Gentiles (11:18).

God wants you to keep listening and to keep learning. He will give you points to ponder. He wants you to obey his word and observe his ways. Are you still learning while you are serving?

Discussion guide for 'Still learning while serving'

1. From Acts 10:4 we can learn that God respects those who sincerely seek after him, even in different faiths.
Describe Cornelius' faith, in your own words, verse 2.¹
2. Why did Peter sound surprised when a voice told him to kill and eat, verse 13-14, also 11:8?
3. Why was God moving Peter's understanding to another level?
4. Think for a few minutes. Are there areas in your Christian understanding you may be challenged into growth - or even change? Why? Why not?
5. How and when did Peter (and the other leaders) know all this was from God?
Consider Acts 11:15-17.
6. Make some time to listen to God by yourself. What do you believe God is calling you to be and to do? What is stopping you?

¹ "A pious attitude towards God; reverence; awe well-directed",
W.E.Vine Complete Expository Dictionary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1996.
"Pious, devout; deeply religious, sincere; heartfelt",
Collins English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1994.