

Peter & the Gentiles

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen people segregating themselves into different groups or “tribes”? Based on what? How can the church be a model of unity in diversity to the world?

Read Acts 10–12.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand that His kingdom is one body made up of all kinds of people brought together by our common identity in Christ.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The gospel is an invitation to all people to come to Jesus, not just the Jews.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

God spoke to Peter through a vision in which God told him he was allowed to eat any kind of animals, clean or unclean. The old covenant law had rules about “unclean” foods Jews were not allowed to eat (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). Peter had followed this law his whole life; he had never eaten anything unclean. God responded, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (10:15). Peter saw this as not just a statement about foods but also about interacting with Gentiles—“God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (10:28). Why? Because the food laws weren’t just about diet, they were part of a system designed to set God’s people apart from the other nations in the way they ate, practiced business, planted fields—everything.

But God’s intent in them living this way was not to exclude the Gentiles because they were unclean; it was to be a light to the Gentiles, to show them the ways of God and invite them into the covenant. The Jews had forgotten that their mission from the beginning was to bless the world, not hoard God’s blessings for themselves (Genesis 12:3). Being set apart wasn’t supposed to be about forming a holy huddle away

from the world but setting an example for the world. Through this experience, Peter came to understand that the true people of God aren't any particular physical nation but people of any nation who follow Jesus (10:34–35).

✚ MEDITATE

"If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *Some churches have an inward focus with their ministries rather than reaching out to the world. Why are we supposed to do both?*

QUESTION *How are you personally reaching out to the world for Jesus?*

In Acts 10–12, we see Peter finally understand that God's mission was never just for the Jews but for the whole world. In Acts 10, God gave Peter a vision and then the experience of the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentiles. In Acts 11, Peter responded to the backlash from the circumcision party that if God had poured out His Spirit on the Gentiles, who were they to argue? In Acts 12, we see God supernaturally intervene in Herod Agrippa's persecution of the church, to keep the message going out into the whole world. This section is the transition point for the church, going from a primarily Jewish movement to a mission to the Gentiles, growing outward "to the ends of the earth." These chapters show us that God's mission has always been for the whole world. Abraham's family was chosen, not to hoard God's blessing for themselves but so the whole world would be blessed through them. In the same way, as God's people in the church, we are not to hoard God's blessing of salvation through Christ for ourselves but share it with the whole world.

✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This section begins the mission to the Gentiles. In Acts 10 Peter had a vision of clean and unclean animals. Then he went to the Roman centurion Cornelius's house and shared the gospel, and the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius's household. Acts 11 tells us of the circumcision party's backlash against Peter preaching to the Gentiles, with a quick aside about the growth of the church at Antioch, which became

the center of the mission to the Gentiles. Acts 12 tells us that James the brother of John was martyred by Herod. Peter was arrested, but an angel opened the prison, and he escaped. The chapter closes with the story of Herod's death, being struck down by God because he let people worship him as a god and did not give God the glory.

1. *Peter's Vision and Cornelius*

2. *The Circumcision Party and the Church at Antioch*

3. *Peter's Arrest and Herod's Death*

[GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 10–12.

1. *Peter's Vision and Cornelius*

✚ READ ACTS 10.

QUESTION *What did God tell Peter about the unclean animals in his vision? What did Peter tell Cornelius that God had shown him?*

QUESTION *What did the Lord do for the household of Cornelius while Peter was teaching?*

At first glance, it may seem like there are two stories in Acts 10, but they are connected. Peter was still in Joppa and received a vision from the Lord. The day before Peter's vision, just north in Caesarea, a God-fearing Gentile named Cornelius received a vision from the Lord to send for Peter to come to him. These two visions are connected, and we see how when we understand the theology behind what God was showing Peter through this whole experience.

Cornelius was a centurion, an officer in the Roman army who led a regiment of a hundred men. He was stationed in Caesarea Maritima, a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean that Herod had dedicated to Caesar Augustus, ergo the name. It was the seat of the Roman procurators (financial officers) and considered by the Romans to be the administrative, economic, military, political, and cultural capital of Judea (Jews considered Jerusalem their capital). As a centurion, Cornelius would have embodied the ideals of a Roman officer—strength, dexterity, vigilance, discipline, energy, efficiency, and obedience. But Cornelius was a “God fearer,” a term Jews used for Gentiles who had not completely converted to Judaism but worshipped the God of Israel and followed some of the Jewish rites and traditions.

An angel appeared to Cornelius and called him by name, telling him to go get Peter. Meanwhile, Peter had a vision of both clean and unclean animals being let down from heaven on a sheet “by its four corners upon the earth,” representing nations from all over the world. God told him to “rise, kill, and eat,” but Peter said no because he had never eaten anything unclean or common by the Old Testament law. God told him, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” When Cornelius’s men appeared, Peter went with them because “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.” He applied God’s words not just to animals and food laws, but to people as well. Why?

The food laws weren’t just about diet. They were part of a system designed to set God’s people apart from the other nations in the way they ate, practiced business, planted fields—everything (Leviticus 20:25–26). But the purpose of them living differently wasn’t to create an exclusive group who hoarded God’s blessings and kept everyone else out. It was to be a light to the Gentiles, to show them God’s good ways so they would be amazed and want to know God and live by His ways too (Deuteronomy 4:5–8; Isaiah 49:6). God told Abraham from the beginning that he was blessed to be a blessing to the world, not to hoard God’s blessings just for his family (Genesis 12:3).

The Jews had taken God’s good laws about clean and unclean and applied them to people too. They had added extra laws that said they couldn’t associate with Gentiles at all because they were unclean (10:28). But God’s law never said that. He said not to follow their practices but to obey His law instead (Leviticus 18:1–5). But He never said not to associate with them. How could they be a light to the Gentiles if they never associated with them? In fact, right in the middle of the section about how these laws set them apart from the nations, God’s law said to welcome any foreigner who wanted to join their community and treat them just like the native-born, like family – to love them as themselves (Leviticus 19:34). God didn’t want His people living by the Gentile’s sinful practices because they were not good for them, but if any Gentile wanted to join their community and live by God’s ways, He welcomed them with open arms. This is what Peter came to realize through the vision of the unclean animals. “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34). It was about so much more than the dietary laws.

When Peter went to Cornelius’s home, he shared the gospel with them, and the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening. Peter later said it was just like the Spirit had done for the Jewish disciples at Pentecost, which proved to him that God shows no partiality and that the gospel is for any and all who would come to Him (11:15–17). This outpouring on the Gentiles initiated a new phase of the church’s ministry. From this point on, they would be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” There would be some bumps in the road with certain Jews still wanting to distinguish between Jew and Gentile (even Peter succumbed to that peer pressure) and some Jews teaching that Gentiles needed to follow Jewish purity laws to follow Jesus. But this was the turning point from which the church went from a primarily Jewish movement to a movement for the whole world.

QUESTION *What does it tell you about God that His invitation to salvation is open to all people?*

QUESTION *What does it tell you about the church?*

QUESTION *What does it tell you about our mission as His witnesses?*

APPLICATION POINT / God chose the Jews to be His people, “the people of my own possession,” but it was never just about them. It was always about God using them as His “kingdom of priests” to reach the whole world (Exodus 19:5–6); “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, *that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*” (Isaiah 49:6). In the new covenant, as the church, we are the people of His own possession, His priests to the world (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9). We cannot sequester ourselves into a holy huddle, hoard all God’s blessing for ourselves, and let the world outside burn. Our mission is to be God’s ambassadors to the world. To be the light to those who don’t know him. To share the gospel with them and live by His ways so they will want to know Him and live by His ways too.

QUESTION *How have you seen churches and Christians separate themselves from the world in a holy-huddle kind of way? How can we reach out to those around us instead?*

QUESTION *How are you being a light to the world around you? When people look at the way you live, are they drawn to the ways of Jesus?*

2. *The Circumcision Party and the Church at Antioch*

✚ READ ACTS 11

QUESTION *Why were the men of the circumcision party upset with Peter? What do you think “circumcision party” might mean?*

QUESTION *What is the shift in the mission of the church noted in v. 19–20?*

When Peter went back to Jerusalem, the “circumcision party” criticized him for eating with Gentiles. The “circumcision party” was a group in the church who argued that Gentile believers had to be circumcised (i.e., become Jewish) to be members of the church. They did not associate at all with Gentiles who had not been circumcised, not even Gentile Christians. When they criticized Peter, he told them about the vision God gave him and how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles the same way it had been on the Jewish disciples at Pentecost. Peter said, “If God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17). When they heard this, they fell silent and agreed with Peter that God has also given the Gentiles salvation and eternal life.

But then, in Galatians, Paul told another story, which would have occurred a few years later, about Peter and the circumcision party in Antioch. He said Peter ate with the Gentiles until certain men from Jerusalem came. Then he separated himself and only ate with the Jews out of fear of the circumcision party, this same group of people he had already corrected! Paul found this so hypocritical that he confronted Peter to his face in front of everyone (Galatians 2:11–12). Peter had been eating with Gentiles and “living like a Gentile” (not following ritual purity laws) since this time in Acts 10–12, but suddenly, he had reneged.

Why was Peter so afraid of these people? He was one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9); they should have submitted to him, not the other way around. Peter had already settled this matter with the circumcision party here in Acts 11. It didn’t make sense for him to be afraid of them years later at Antioch. This shows us that even the most dedicated of disciples can be wrong, make mistakes, or give in to peer pressured to sin, especially when it relates to some kind of faction in the church. This reminds us to fight even more against division in the church and work toward unity.

The second half of chapter 11 tells us about the church at Antioch, almost as an aside—while all these other things were going on, this is what was happening at Antioch. It is significant that Luke described it here, because Antioch became the center of the church’s mission to the Gentiles. Jerusalem was the original center of the church, but once the mission started spreading “to the ends of the earth,” the center shifted to Antioch. It became the sending church for all of Paul’s missionary journeys.

Luke said that after the stoning of Stephen, the disciples scattered even as far as Antioch, but they only preached the gospel to the Jews in those places. But then some men from Cyprus (an island in the Mediterranean, south of Greece) and Cyrene (a town on the coast of the Mediterranean in North Africa, in the westernmost part of Egypt) began to preach to the Gentiles in Antioch. The believers there sent for Barnabas, a Hellenized Jew from Cyprus who was part of the first church in Jerusalem. Barnabas went to Tarsus and got Saul, and they stayed in Antioch for a year teaching the people there.

Antioch was a large city with an eclectic mix of cultures and ethnicities. It was built as an intentionally divided city; a literal wall separated the Syrians and Greeks. At least eighteen different ethnic groups

lived there, all segregated into different communities. But the church at Antioch was different; it combined all these groups into one community. This is why Luke said they were first called “Christians” at Antioch. They were not grouped by nationality but defined by their allegiance to Christ. That was now their identity. They had redefined themselves according to Christ and His kingdom, not their ethnic kingdoms. Their citizenship was in the kingdom of God. They didn’t lose their ethnic identity, but it was no longer what defined them. It was no longer their community, their “family,” the people group they chose to align themselves with. Instead of grouping themselves with other Greeks or Ethiopians or Syrians, they grouped themselves with other Christians. This was their chosen family. Like we saw in Jerusalem, but on a much greater scale, this community was the definition of unity in diversity. It is this diversity that made Antioch such a model for what God’s kingdom is like—a great multitude of followers of Jesus from every nation, tribe, and tongue, all united as one body.

QUESTION *How did Peter submit to God’s authority in this story?*

QUESTION *What kind of image of the kingdom of God did the Christians at Antioch paint for the community around them, which was divided by nationality? Why might that have been attractive to them?*

APPLICATION POINT / We divide ourselves in a lot of ways. Sometimes it’s by ethnic identity. Many communities are divided into neighborhoods and groups by race or ethnic background. In many places, even churches are divided that way. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, and in many places that’s still true. But we also divide ourselves in other ways—by socioeconomic level, political party, education, interests, backgrounds, etc.

The church is the one place where people of all groups can come together in unity, bound by one common Spirit and one common purpose. Because once we have become a new creation in Christ, He is our identity. Whatever we were before, whatever else are we, we are all Christians now. We don’t lose those other things that make us who we are (ethnicity, background, education, political beliefs, etc.), but they no longer define us. They become secondary to our identity in Christ. Instead of grouping ourselves in those other ways, we group ourselves with other believers as our family. This is how we can have true unity in diversity, because we have a common identity, mission, and purpose in Christ and His Kingdom.

QUESTION *What would it look like for you to define your identity according to Christ and His kingdom rather than any other “group” you are a part of?*

QUESTION *How can defining ourselves by Christ and His kingdom help when we have conflicts in the church, when we see things from different perspectives based on our different backgrounds? How can pursuing Christ and His mission and kingdom keep us unified?*

3. Peter’s Arrest and Herod’s Death

✚ READ ACTS 12

QUESTION *How did Peter escape from prison?*

QUESTION *Why did God strike Herod Agrippa dead on the spot?*

The church had peace for a while because Saul had been converted, but now the persecution had returned. Instead of just being persecuted by the Jewish leaders, who thought they were purifying the people of God, they were now being persecuted by Herod, the political leader. This was Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and brother of Herodias, who was married to Herod Antipas (after leaving Herod Philip) and had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14). Herod Agrippa grew up in Rome and was a friend to the Roman emperor Caligula and played crucial roles in Roman politics. Agrippa came to power in 39 AD, when he returned to Judea from Rome and accused Herod Antipas of forming a plot against Rome. Caligula exiled Antipas to the south of Gaul and made Agrippa king.

With his dual Jewish/Roman identity, Agrippa played the role of intercessor with the Roman authorities on behalf of the Jews. He was careful to follow Jewish customs and was generous to the people, so he was very popular among the Jews. But he persecuted the Christians because they were a threat to the Jews (12:11). He executed James the brother of John (12:2), who with John and Peter, was one of the three in Jesus’s inner circle. He also arrested Peter, intending to bring him out for a public trial to make an example of him (12:3–4). But the church prayed earnestly for Peter, and an angel appeared in shining light, his chains fell off. When the angel directed Peter to follow him out of the prison, Peter thought he was just seeing a vision, but he was really escaping (12:5–10). He went to the house of the mother of John Mark (who traveled with Paul and Barnabas and wrote the Gospel of Mark) because many had gathered there to pray. Peter told them to tell James (the brother of Jesus who was leading the church in Jerusalem)

about this and then left so he wouldn't be found by Agrippa's men.

Agrippa went to Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of the area. There he brokered a deal with the people of Tyre and Sidon, two port cities on the coast of the Mediterranean north of Judea and Samaria that were often condemned by the prophets in the Old Testament for their pride, idolatry, and hostility toward God's people (Isaiah 23:1; Ezekiel 26:4; Joel 3:4; Zechariah 9:1–4). Yet Jesus had gone there and healed a young girl, showing His disciples that His ministry extended to all people (Mark 7:24–30). When Agrippa sat on the throne to address the people about the peace treaty with Tyre and Sidon, the crowds called him a god. The Bible says he put on "royal garments"; the Jewish historian Josephus said he was wearing a garment of silver that shined in the sun and made him look like a god. Agrippa did not deny it or turn the glory to God, so God immediately struck him dead (12:20–23).

When Agrippa died, the word of God increased and multiplied—the church grew. This chapter shows us how God Himself supernaturally took care of the threat of Herod Agrippa against the church. When Peter was arrested, God sent an angel to break him out of prison. When Agrippa allowed himself to be worshipped as a god, the Lord struck him dead. These stories show us the power and sovereignty of God. We don't know why God allows evil things to happen sometimes and intervenes at others, like allowing James to be killed but rescuing Peter. But we know God has the power to do anything, He will not allow His plans to be thwarted, and He will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). In both these stories, God supernaturally intervened to keep His message spreading and flourishing. Herod was trying to persecute the church, and God just flat-out put a stop to it.

QUESTION *How many times does the story of Peter's arrest tell us the people were praying for him? What does this tell us about the power of prayer?*

QUESTION *Imagine you were a Jew in the crowd at Agrippa's throne, joining in calling him a god, but then you saw him suddenly die. What would you think? How would it impact your view of God?*

APPLICATION POINT / These stories show us that God is in control, and His plan will not be hindered by anything. No human king can thwart God's will. Though God does allow bad things to happen, He takes what the enemy meant for evil and uses it for good to accomplish His will (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). He can work through us in natural ways or intervene supernaturally in what is going on in our lives. God is in ultimate control of all things and His will will be done. Our job is to listen for the guidance of His Spirit and follow where He leads.

QUESTION *What are some ways God has supernaturally intervened in your life?*

QUESTION *How have you seen people treat a human being as if they were a god? Even in the church sometimes? How can we be sure we are not worshipping a person but truly worshipping God alone?*

[NEXT STEPS]

This section gives us a beautiful image of God's kingdom as one big family of people from all different walks of life and all different people groups joined together in unity in Christ. Because once we become new creations in Him, our identity is found in Christ. The church is now our "tribe," our family. This week, focus on your identity in Christ and how that binds you to other Christians from all different walks of life. Consider ways you can tear down walls between different groups in your church and build unity among you. Also reach out to an unbeliever who is different from you to build relationship and share the gospel.

[PRAY]

+Use the following song as a prayer for unity in Christ this week. Feel free to look it up online and listen to it and sing along:

Bind Us Together, Lord, by John Keys

*Bind us together, Lord, bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, Lord,
Bind us together in love.*

*There is only one God, there is only one King,
There is only one Body, that is why we sing:*

*Though there are many branches, there is only one vine,
We are one in Christ Jesus, that is why we sing:*

*One with Christ in his death that, as one, we might rise.
So we are but one people, that is why we sing:*

*There is only one table, Christ alone is our host.
He invites us together, that is why we sing:
Amen.*