

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson 67

The Raising of Dorcas

The Scripture Lesson *Acts 9:31-42*

After the stoning of Stephen there was a persecution of the Christians, especially of those who lived in Jerusalem. Many of them, you will remember, had to flee for their lives. At last, this persecution died down. There was a time of peace and quiet for the church. And during that time of quiet the church grew, so that new congregations were started in many places throughout the country.

The apostles, often, would go around the country and visit these churches. In our story for this week we find that Peter was doing that. As he went from place to place, he came also to the town of Lydda. There he learned about a man by the name of Aeneas. This man was paralyzed in his legs, and probably in his arms too. That means that he was not able to use his arms and legs, and so, for eight years already, he had lain all day every day on a little bed. Peter came to this poor man and said, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed." And Aeneas did so at once. Many people heard about this wonderful miracle, and when they saw the man walking as if he had never been paralyzed, they believed the preaching of Peter that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

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Meanwhile, in Joppa, a town about nine miles away, there were some very sad people. One of the members of their congregation was a good woman by the name of Dorcas. Dorcas herself was not very rich; but she would use what money she had to buy cloth, and then she would work for hours and hours making clothes for poor widows. She was a hard, hard worker and she tried always to do everything she could to help others. But she had lately become very sick and, much to the sorrow of the people in the church, she died.

Instead of burying her at once, as they would otherwise have done, they put her in a bed in an upper room, and sent two men to Lydda to find Peter. The two men hurried to Lydda, and when they told Peter their sad story, he right away went with them.

When Peter got to the upper room he found there many of the widows who had been helped by Dorcas. They told him how much good she had done for their church. Peter told them all to leave, and then he kneeled down and prayed. And the Lord somehow answered Peter that He would raise Dorcas through Peter's word. So Peter turned to Dorcas and told her to arise. And she did! Then Peter called the mourners back into the room and presented her to them alive and healthy.

This was truly an amazing miracle. Word of

it spread quickly through Joppa. And, again, many people believed in the Lord. That was one of the reasons why Christ did this miracle — to bring the people to believe what Peter preached, that in Jesus alone there is the hope of resurrection and life.

The Visions of Cornelius and Peter

Acts 9:43 - 10:18

Not far from Joppa, where Peter was staying, there was the city of Caesarea. In that city there was a man by the name of Cornelius. He was a centurion, an army officer with 100 Roman soldiers under him. This man had learned, from the Jews, about *God*. The Bible tells us that he *feared* God, with all his family and all his servants. He was also generous in giving money to the poor; and he spent much time in prayer to God

But he was an uncircumcised Gentile. The Jews therefore considered him to be an outsider. They thought it was wrong for them even to keep company with a man like Cornelius. That was not because they believed Cornelius to be a *bad* man, but simply because they knew him to be a *Gentile*. God had commanded the people of Israel to be a *separate* people. He had told them not to mix with people of other nations. And to remind them that they must be a separate people, God had given them laws about clean and unclean animals, and about foods they may or may not eat.

For hundreds of years the Jews were under those laws. For hundreds of years they believed that salvation was for the Jews only. Cornelius knew all about that. Yet he prayed to God that he might have a part in the salvation that was for the Jews.

God heard those prayers. One day, while Cornelius was praying, an angel appeared to him in a vision. The angel told him to send to Joppa for Simon Peter. Cornelius right away called two of his servants and one of his soldiers, told them about his vision, and sent them off to Joppa.

Meanwhile, God also gave a vision to Peter. The apostle was at the time on the flat roof of the house, praying, when he fell into a trance. In a trance a person is sort of half asleep and half awake, half conscious and half unconscious. In that condi-

tion Peter saw a vision in which the sky opened up, and out of it came a great sheet, held by the four corners and let down to the earth. It stopped right in front of Peter. He saw that it contained all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean. Now, we must remember that the Jews had always been careful never to mix animals in that way, and certainly never to *eat* any animals that God said should be unclean to them. But Peter hears a voice from heaven saying, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

To Peter, who had been brought up according to all of the ceremonial laws of Moses, that seemed to be so *wrong*. So he answered, “Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.” But the voice answered, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” That was what Peter had to learn. He did not yet understand that Christ had brought an *end* to all those ceremonial laws. The apostles did not understand that there was no longer a difference between clean and unclean *animals*, and that there was therefore no longer a difference between *people* — that is, between Jew and Gentile. They still thought that if a Gentile believes in God he must become a Jew by being circumcised. All these things were simply not true anymore. It was important for Peter to *learn* that — before the arrival of the messengers who would ask him to come into the very house of a Gentile. That is why God gave Peter the vision.

Peter did not immediately know what the vision meant. But the answer, as we shall see, was close at hand, for the men from Cornelius were already at his door.

MEMORY WORK

Group A

Acts 10:14, 15 “But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

Group B

Acts 10:15 “And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. When Peter was on a tour of the churches, he came also to the town of Lydda, where he healed Aeneas, who had been confined to his bed for eight years.
- ___ 2. While Peter was in Lydda, two men from the town of Joppa came and asked him to come with them to Joppa to heal a sick woman.
- ___ 3. The woman, whose name was Dorcas, was well known among the Christians, because she had given large sums of money to the church.
- ___ 4. Before all of the saints gathered around her bed, Peter raised Dorcas from the dead.
- ___ 5. Not far from Joppa, in the city of Caesarea, there lived a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius.
- ___ 6. An angel of God came to Cornelius in a vision and told him to send to Joppa for a man by the name of Peter.
- ___ 7. Shortly before the messengers from Cornelius arrived, Peter went to the top of the house in which he was staying in Joppa, and there he fell into a trance and saw a vision from God.
- ___ 8. In that vision Peter saw a great sheet, let down from heaven by its four corners, containing a mixture of clean and unclean animals.
- ___ 9. Peter then heard a voice from heaven saying, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."
- ___ 10. Peter understood that this was a command of God; so, though he had never before eaten anything unclean, Peter immediately arose and ate.
- ___ 11. By this vision Peter was prepared by God for the request that he go to Caesarea and enter the very house of an uncircumcised Gentile.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. How did it happen that the apostle Peter was in the town of Lydda?
2. Who was Aeneas? What did Peter do for him? What good effect did that miracle have in Lydda?
3. The Bible tells us that there lived in Joppa a woman by the name of Dorcas, who was "full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." Can you give an example of her good works?
4. When Dorcas died, why did the mourners send for Peter?
5. How did the raising of Dorcas help the growth of the church in Joppa?
6. Where did Cornelius the centurion live? What work did he do there?
7. What does the Bible tell us about Cornelius that shows that he was a pious, God-fearing man?
8. If Cornelius was such a godly man, why would the Jews be careful not to keep company with him?
9. What did the angel of God who appeared to Cornelius in a vision tell Cornelius to do?
10. What did Peter see in his trance?
11. What did Peter say when a voice from heaven told him to rise and eat? Why was Peter afraid to eat of those animals?
12. Why had God given the Old Testament Israelites strict rules about clean and unclean animals? What did the apostles have to learn about all the ceremonial laws?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. From other historical records we learn that, at about the time when Saul fled for his life from Jerusalem, the Jews throughout the Roman Empire suffered from the wrath of the Roman emperor because they refused to worship him as a god. This particular emperor went so far as to demand that they put a huge statue of himself in the Holy of Holies. Because they resisted, the Jews suffered persecution, sometimes very severe. The Sanhedrin may therefore have been so occupied with these matters that they had no time to pursue their own persecution of Christians. Perhaps that accounts for the fact that then the churches had _____ throughout all _____ and Galilee and _____, and were _____ — that is, they were strengthened in their faith and in the piety of their walk. Such godliness apparently had the effect of drawing others to them, for we read that, walking in the _____ of the Lord, they were _____ (Acts 9:31).

2. This meant that churches were being established in various places throughout the country. Very likely the apostles made it a point to visit these congregations from time to time. It was on one such mission that Peter passed throughout all _____ and came down also to the saints which dwelt at _____ (Acts 9:32).

3. There Peter found a man by the name of _____ who, because he was sick of the _____, had been confined to his bed for eight _____. Him would Peter heal — but only after making it clear to Aeneas that the apostles' power to do so rested not in themselves but in Another. "Aeneas," Peter said, "_____ maketh thee _____; arise and make thy _____." And he arose _____ (Acts 9:33, 34).

4. The cure of this long-time paralytic did indeed have the effect of magnifying the name of Jesus; for we read that, when those who dwelt at Lydda and _____ saw the healed man, they turned to the _____ (Acts 9:35).

5. Meanwhile, the Christians in the city of Joppa (about nine miles from Lydda) learned that Peter was in their area. They were glad about that because it happened that there was in their congregation a dear woman who was gravely ill. Her name, in the Aramaic language spoken by the Jews, was Tabitha, which Luke translates to _____ in the Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written. Dorcas was a woman who was greatly appreciated for the good _____ and _____ which she did. However, before her friends could bring word of her sickness to Peter, Dorcas died. Her friends therefore washed the body, as was the custom for burial; but then, instead of burying her at once, which was also customary in that day, they _____ her in an _____ chamber. Then they sent two men to Lydda, desiring Peter that he not _____ to come to them (Acts 9:36-38).

6. When Peter arrived he was brought to the upper chamber, and all the widows of the church stood by him _____, showing him the coats and _____ that Dorcas had made for the poor while she was yet alive. Now, Peter did not have in himself any power to raise the dead. The power was Christ's alone. And Peter had to wait for the leading of the Spirit, to know when the Lord would be pleased to work a miracle through him. He therefore sent all the mourners out of the room, while he _____ down and _____ (Acts 9:39, 40).

7. It was very likely on the basis of an answer to that prayer, that Peter then turned toward the dead body and said simply and confidently, "Tabitha, _____." And she opened her _____ and when she saw Peter she _____ up. Not only, in other words, was she restored to *life*, but also to *health* (Acts 9:40).

8. Because the miracles of the apostles were always worked in connection with their preaching of Christ, the effect of this great wonder was not that *Peter's* fame spread abroad, but that many in Joppa believed in the _____ (Acts 9:42).

9. Peter was at this time not far from Caesarea, where lived a man by the name of Cornelius. In the good providence of God this man, with Peter, would be used for the opening of the door of the church to Gentiles. This Cornelius was a _____, that is, a commander of 100 Roman soldiers. Stationed in Caesarea, he had had frequent contact with Jews. Having learned to love their religion, he was now a _____ man, and one who feared _____ with all his _____, gave much _____ to the people, and prayed to God _____ (Acts 10:1, 2).

10. The prayer of this godly centurion must often have been that he be granted, though he be a Gentile, a share in the Messianic promises made to the Jews. That prayer would soon be answered in a way far more wonderful than he could ever have hoped, for in his very home the Lord would give evidence of the perfect equality of all believing Gentiles and believing Jews in the new dispensation. As preparation for this, Cornelius saw in a _____, about the _____ hour of the day, an _____ of God coming to him. “Thy _____ and thine _____,” the angel said, “are come up for a memorial before _____” (Acts 10:3, 4).

11. The angel then directed Cornelius to send men to _____, to call for one _____ whose surname is _____. Peter, the angel said to Cornelius, will tell thee what thou _____ to do (Acts 10:5, 6).

12. As soon as the angel departed, Cornelius called two of his household _____ and a _____ soldier of them that waited on him, and, when he had _____ all these things unto them, he sent them to _____ (Acts 10:7, 8).

13. It was as these messengers from Cornelius drew _____ unto the city, the next day, that the Lord took care to prepare Peter for their arrival. Peter went up upon the _____ to _____ at about the _____ hour.

On the housetop he became very _____; and while he was waiting for food to be prepared he fell into a _____, and saw _____ opened, and there descended to him a certain vessel, like a great _____ knit at the four corners. When the vessel came to rest in front of him, Peter saw that it contained _____ manner of four-footed beasts of the earth and wild beasts, and _____ things, and _____ of the air. There was, in other words, a mixture of clean and unclean animals. Peter must therefore have been surprised to hear a voice say, “Rise, Peter, _____ and _____” (Acts 10:9-13).

14. Peter understood that the vision came from God Himself. He knew too, however, that the old distinction between clean and unclean animals was also one that had come from *God*. Afraid therefore to touch what was forbidden by the law of God, Peter answered, “Not so, _____, for I have _____ eaten any thing that is _____ or unclean” (Acts 10:14).

15. From heaven itself came the answer to Peter, that the old ceremonial law making distinction between clean and unclean animals was abolished: “What God hath _____, that call not thou _____” (Acts 10:15).

16. What Peter saw in his vision was a collection of animals. And God spoke to him from heaven about those animals. The truth is, however, that the “cleansing” of which God told Peter included more than just animals and food. For, the distinction in animals was but a small part of a host of regulations regarding cleanness and uncleanness, all of which taught Israel about a *national* distinction and separation — a separation between Jew and Gentile. If therefore the difference in *meats* were to fall, the difference between *peoples* would fall with it. This is what Peter must learn. And a hard lesson it was. God’s command, “rise and eat,” came to Peter _____ (Acts 10:16), and each time Peter apparently raised the same objection. He did not at once, of course, understand the meaning of the vision. Very soon however he would learn, for while he

_____ in himself what this _____ which he had seen should _____, the men who had been sent by the Gentile Cornelius had made _____ for Simon's house, and now stood before the _____ (Acts 10:17).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Acts 9:32 seems to suggest that, when Peter came to Lydda, he was on a tour of the churches in Judea. Why, do you suppose, did the apostles consider it necessary to conduct this kind of church visiting?
2. When Peter healed the long-time paralytic in Lydda, he made a point of saying to the man, "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole." What does that tell us about the purpose of the miracles of the apostles in the early New Testament church?
3. Can you think of a reason why such miracles of healing did not extend beyond the time of the apostles? Will there be a time in the history of the world when miracles will again be wrought? (See II Thessalonians 2:8-12.)
4. In Luke's account of Dorcas in Acts 9:36-42, is there anything that would suggest that Dorcas was likely not a rich woman?
5. If Dorcas had already *died*, why would the two messengers (Acts 9:38) urge Peter to come with them *quickly* to Joppa?
6. Luke does not, of course, record all of the conversation between the messengers and Peter. What do you think, did the messengers say anything to Peter about their hope that Dorcas might be raised from the dead?
7. How was Peter's power to work miracles different from Christ's?
8. What evidence is there in the account of the raising of Dorcas that the miracle included a restoration of good health?
9. If Dorcas' work on this earth was not yet finished, why did it happen, according to God's will, that she *died* of her sickness?
10. Going to heaven is a great, great good for the child of God. In that light, can it be said that the raising of Dorcas was a blessing also for *her*?
11. There were two kinds of Gentile proselytes to Judaism. One involved simply an adopting of the Jews' religion; the other involved actually becoming a Jew through circumcision. After reading Acts 10:28 can you tell which kind of proselyte Cornelius must have been?
12. Acts 10:2 describes the piety of Cornelius the centurion. What does his fearing God "with all his house" tell us about this man's devotion to the God of the Jews? Can you tell, from the rest of the account, whether "all his house" included more than members of his family?
13. Acts 10:3 says that Cornelius saw *in a vision* an angel of God coming to him. What do you think — does that mean that the angel of God was *not really present*? And what about Peter's trance on the housetop of Simon the tanner — did Peter see a *real animal-laden sheet*?
14. What Cornelius needed was to learn about Jesus. Why, do you suppose, did the angel not himself teach Cornelius, instead of directing him to send for Peter?
15. If God's purpose in Peter's vision on the housetop of Simon the tanner was to prepare Peter for his visit with Cornelius the centurion, why did He show Peter a sheet full of clean and unclean animals? In other words, what is the connection between, on the one hand, the status of the ceremonial laws for New Testament Christians and, on the other hand, the *progress of the gospel*?
16. To the command of God, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat," Peter replied, "Not so, Lord." In light of Leviticus 11, why should we not consider Peter's answer to be simply a bold refusal to obey? From God's answer, "What God hath cleansed...", what should Peter have learned about the status of the ceremonial laws for the church of the new dispensation?
17. Peter had showed before (see Acts 2:39) that he understood Jesus' commission that the gospel be preached also to the Gentiles (see Luke 24:27). What was it that the apostles did not yet understand about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church of Christ? Can you explain how the vision of Peter was a clarification of that problem?