

A Turning Point in God's Plan

“Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.”
—Acts 10:34

RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS

and emotions are often deep-rooted in the human heart, and well they might be, for they represent our endeavors to worship and serve our God.

Those who hold their religious views halfheartedly and who consider them to be subject to change with each new theory that they may happen to hear and like, are but little, if any, better off than those who are not believers at all. The desire to be established in what one believes is commendable, for only thus is the Christian safe from being blown about by “every wind of doctrine.”
—Eph. 4:14

One should, of course, endeavor to be established in truth, not in error. To be established in truth by means of a careful consideration of the direct testimony of God's Word means that such an individual not only knows what he or she believes, but why. As a result, they are ready always to give a reason for their hope—the only reason which Christians

should ever give, which is the testimony of the Word of God.—I Pet. 3:15

The principles of truth found in God's Holy Word are progressive in the sense that we learn to understand them better over the course of time, but they do not change. Those principles which were true in the past are true today and will be also tomorrow. We may have a better understanding of these things today than in the past, and have even a greater understanding tomorrow than today. However, that is because we have developed, not because the Truth has changed. Moreover, there are due seasons for certain features of God's Word to be understood, and if it is given to us to be living at a time when the plan of God moves forward from one point of development to another, we may be blessed with a greater understanding of those details. Nevertheless, if our increased knowledge is true it will be in harmony with that which we have previously learned and proven by the Scriptures, not contradictory to them.

It was this great blessing which came to the apostles and other Jewish disciples following the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, when the early Christian church began to be established, starting at Pentecost. Since the death of Jacob, when God began to deal with his twelve sons as the nucleus of the Jewish nation, he had restricted his blessing to this one people. God had said, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."—Amos 3:2

Jesus, who knew the plan of God and was loyal thereto, confined his ministry to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," and in sending out his disciples

to represent him, he instructed them not to go “into the way of the Gentiles,” nor to any “city of the Samaritans.” (Matt. 10:5,6; 15:24) This was not because Jesus did not love the Gentiles, nor because no provision had been made in the plan of God for the blessing of the Gentiles. It was simply because he was loyal to God’s plan as it applied at that particular time.

Following his resurrection, and before his ascension, Jesus widened the scope of his commission to the disciples, telling them to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, beginning at Jerusalem. (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) Even then, however, the due time for the Gentiles to hear had not fully come, but Jesus knew that if his disciples began their work at Jerusalem, it would be a while before they were able to reach out to the Gentiles. By then, it would be the due time. Probably Jesus also knew that merely this one statement to the disciples concerning the full scope of their work would not be sufficient, by itself, to lead them into the new Truth concerning the Gentiles.

DANIEL’S PROPHECY OF SEVENTY WEEKS

God had set a definite time limit to his exclusive favor to the Jewish nation. This is brought to our attention in Daniel 9:24-27. The total length of time outlined in this prophecy is described as “seventy weeks,” or 490 prophetic days [70 weeks multiplied by 7 days equals 490 prophetic days]. Elsewhere in the Bible is recorded the key to understanding this prophetic time period, that key being a “day for a year.” (Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6) In other words, in prophecy one “day” actually represents one literal

year. Therefore, seventy prophetic weeks [490 prophetic days] equates to four hundred and ninety actual years in total. This allotted time was to begin with the issuing of a decree to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and would reach to “Messiah the Prince.”—Dan. 9:25

More specifically, according to Daniel’s prophecy, the close of the sixty-ninth week would be the time for the appearance of the Messiah, and in the midst, or the center of the seventieth week he would be “cut off” in death, “but not for himself”—that is, not on account of his own sins, but as the Redeemer of the world. The prophet, however, states that the “covenant” would be confirmed with many until the full end of this seventieth week. God had entered into a covenant with the natural descendants of Abraham, and this covenant of exclusive favor was to be continued with a remnant of the Israelites until the end of this seventy weeks’ period.—vss. 26,27

As each of these symbolic weeks was seven actual years in length, and as the Messiah was cut off in death in the midst or center of the seventieth week, it follows that not until three and one-half years after his death would it be the due time for the Gospel message to go to the Gentiles.

In passing, it is well to observe an important point in connection with the beginning of this seventy weeks of favor to the Jews. Apparently God wished to conceal this time measurement to some extent; so in his providence, the decree foretold in Daniel’s prophecy is often overlooked. On this point we suggest a careful reading of the two historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which we note were written

during the time of the Jews' captivity to the Persian Empire. In Ezra 1:1-3 is recorded a decree of Persian King Cyrus concerning a rebuilding work in Jerusalem. However, Cyrus' decree applied to the temple only. The rebuilding of the city, mentioned by Daniel, was not started at that time because no decree had been issued giving the Jews authority to do so. Finally, several decades later, the matter was brought to the attention of another Persian king, Artaxerxes. He issued the necessary decree of authority, and the building of the city and the walls got under way.—Neh. 1:3; 2:1-6

The word "Messiah," recorded in Daniel 9:25,26, means "anointed." Jesus' title as Messiah did not begin until he was baptized at the age of 30 and received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 3:13-17) This occurred at the close of the sixty-ninth symbolic week and the beginning of the seventieth. Three and one-half years thereafter, in the midst of the final week of seven years, Jesus died, and another three and one-half years later would denote the full end of God's exclusive favor to the Jews.

CORNELIUS THE DEVOUT

When God's time clock strikes the hour of change, the divine timekeeper sees to it that the called-for change is made. There are never any delays in the plan of God. His ways are unlimited, his methods unique and effective. Consequently, when the proper time came, we find recorded that in a city named Caesarea there lived a devout Gentile named Cornelius. He was a praying man, and unselfish in the giving of alms. He was "a centurion of the band

called the Italian band”—meaning in the Greek, he was a captain over one hundred soldiers. Apparently this was somewhat of an honored position. Cornelius was respected because of it and looked up to also on account of his nobility of character.—Acts 10:1,2

The wonderful story of Cornelius is recorded throughout the 10th chapter of Acts. There we learn that his whole family were likewise God-fearing people. Yet they were not Christians. It requires more than devotion in prayer, and the giving of alms to make one a Christian. A knowledge of Christ, the acceptance of him, and a full consecration to do God’s will as it is outlined in his Word, are the conditions upon which one may become a disciple of Christ. Cornelius did not yet have sufficient knowledge of these things. Until now, God’s due time to favor Gentiles had not yet come. Not until the full end of the seventy prophetic weeks of favor to Israel could Cornelius’ prayers be answered.

What blessings were in store, however, for this devout soul when the due time arrived! Cornelius was favored with a vision. An angel appeared to him and explained that his prayers had come up as a memorial before God. Indeed, his prayers had been heard, although not yet answered. (Acts 10:3,4) They were remembered by God, nevertheless, and because they revealed the wholehearted sincerity and devotion of Cornelius, he was being selected as the first Gentile to be accepted into the church of Christ. Not only so, but in connection with his acceptance there was to be such a miraculous weaving of divine providence as to silence forever

all doubts that a great change had occurred—that those previously considered to be mere outcasts were now eligible upon conditions of faith and obedience for joint heirship with the Messiah in his glorious kingdom.

The angel who spoke to Cornelius instructed him to send for Peter. He told Cornelius just where Peter could be found, even naming the home in which he was being entertained. At the time, Peter was in Joppa, living in the home of Simon the Tanner, located by the edge of the sea. This information was given to Cornelius in detail and he was told to send at once for Peter who would instruct him in what to do.—Acts 10:5-8

WHAT GOD HAS CLEANED

Meanwhile God was also preparing Peter. This was too important a matter to be left to chance. All of God's business is too important for that. Nothing in a Christian's life just happens. His providences are not always as outstanding nor as clearly manifested as were his dealings with Cornelius and Peter, but they are just as real. Let us take comfort in this assurance.

Peter had been in Joppa for some time. The Lord had blessed his efforts there. He had been used by God to awaken Dorcas from the sleep of death, and this had brought considerable popularity to the Gospel in that district. We can imagine him in the home of Simon on this particular day. It may have been a day of rest, or of fellowship with the family. Perhaps he had been about the city bearing witness to the Truth and had come back for the evening meal and for the night.—Acts 9:36-43

Whatever the circumstances, Peter was tired, and he went up on the flat roof of the house to pray. He was hungry too, the account tells us. While on the roof praying and waiting for the meal to be prepared, he fell asleep and was given a vision by God—one we are sure Peter never forgot. He saw a basket, formed by holding together four corners of a sheet let down from heaven. This basket was filled with all sorts of reptiles, birds, and other animals, which according to the Jewish law were unclean and not fit to eat.—Acts 10:9-12

As the basket was lowered he heard a voice bidding him to “Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.” Peter said, “Not so, Lord.” His loyalty to the Jewish Law would not permit him to eat that which was unclean, so he refused. However, the Lord insisted, telling him that whatever God had cleansed he was not to consider common or unclean. Three times the sheet was let down and the invitation repeated to partake. Then Peter awakened, and the Spirit said to him that messengers were in front of the house to see him.—vss. 13-20

Peter was now alert. He pondered in his heart what the vision might mean and he carefully watched every providence of God that he might find out. He went down to where the messengers were waiting and learned that they had been sent by the Gentile, Cornelius. They told Peter of the wonderful experience of their master, and that they had come by his request, and by the providence of God, to bring the apostle to Caesarea to explain the Truth to Cornelius.—vss. 21,22

Peter, probably still wondering what all these strange events might mean, but not wishing to stand

in God's way, invited the messengers into the home for the night. Evidently Simon the Tanner had turned the home over to Peter's use, or least a part of it, to serve as a headquarters for the Gospel work, hence the apostle felt free to invite these Gentiles to remain overnight.—Acts 10:23

Great events were in the offing. That, Peter knew! He did not want to trust too much in his own judgment as to what these events might mean, so that evening he contacted certain other believers in Joppa and arranged with six of them to accompany him to Caesarea and to the home of Cornelius. This was a wise procedure. Peter, although one of the apostles, felt his own lack of wisdom and great need of counsel. Too often the Lord's people do not take this humble and wise view of matters. We may be prone to think we are such good students that we do not need the help of others. The most-used servants in the church are those who are willing to learn from others. Peter was humble, and he was wise.—Acts 10:23,24; 11:12

The journey to Caesarea allowed some time during which Peter, no doubt, pondered over the meaning of things. He was not altogether surprised when they reached the home of Cornelius to find a considerable company of Gentiles gathered for a meeting. Cornelius met him with rather more than due respect, falling at his feet in worship. Peter corrected this immediately, explaining to him that he was a mere man just as Cornelius was.—Acts 10:24-26

Entering the home of Cornelius, and realizing that he was in the company of Gentiles, contrary to the Jewish tradition, the full meaning of his vision

now seemed to dawn upon Peter. Now he saw what it was that God was saying to him by insisting that he eat unclean animals. These unclean Gentiles were to be made clean by God's arrangement and accepted into the fellowship of the saints.—vss. 27,28

Perhaps even now Peter was not fully convinced. His fellow-countrymen, the Jews, were God's chosen people. All God's prophets had said so. To them Jesus had ministered exclusively. Upon them only the Holy Spirit had descended at Pentecost. Certainly this was true. Could it also be true that God now had in his plan a place for Gentiles? Peter is to be commended for being cautious. Much was involved, and he wanted to be sure that he was interpreting the Lord's message correctly.

When he put all the facts together—Cornelius' vision, his own vision, the perfect timing of the two, and the Lord's providence in bringing him to Caesarea—it made him quite sure of one thing, which was that God wanted him to preach the Gospel to Cornelius, his household, and the guests which were assembled. This he did, and while he preached the Holy Spirit came upon them as it had come upon the Jewish disciples at Pentecost.—vss. 34-45

Now there could be no doubt. The apostles considered the Holy Spirit's manifestation at Pentecost as an evidence of their acceptance into the spiritual house of sons. Could they deny the meaning of this same evidence now that it had come to the Gentiles? Certainly not! Peter was established in the faith of his fathers, but he was also teachable. Here was an increase in his understanding! It did not deny that God had dealt exclusively with the Jews for a time. That still was true, but now a

change had come. God's plan had taken a step forward. Now believing Gentiles were to enjoy the same blessings of divine favor as believing Jews.

Peter had not only learned something new, but his mind and his heart had been enlarged. "I perceive," he said, "that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10:34,35) Thus was the opening of the narrow way to the Gentiles clearly marked. The door to the High Calling had swung back to let them enter. Of that there could be no mistake.

Later, when the news of what had occurred reached Jerusalem, it became an important topic of discussion among the brethren, and to set the minds of the church at rest, Peter related all that had taken place. The brethren agreed that he had placed the proper construction upon the events, and they were glad to learn that from then onward other Gentiles were accepting the Gospel and receiving the blessing of the Lord.—Acts 11:1-18

LESSONS FOR TODAY

Who can doubt when reading this Scriptural account that God is in charge of all his plans and purposes? Had the matter been left solely to Peter, or to any of the apostles, they perhaps would never have started missionary work among the Gentiles. Jesus of course, had told them this time would come, but Truth is sometimes hard to learn. We are loath to change our viewpoint. We are slow to expand upon our oftentimes very circumscribed spheres of life and perspective. Peter had to be carefully guided into this enlarged service. Blessed

are they who enter into larger fields when, as was the case with Peter, the Lord's providences so clearly indicate his will.

Peter's ministry in Joppa had been richly blessed. It was no doubt in the Lord's providence that he was cared for so comfortably in the home of Simon the Tanner. Perhaps he felt that now he could settle down in this one place and work for God, but God overruled otherwise. The call came and Peter answered. Because he responded, God used him mightily as the work of the Gospel expanded to take in the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Since Peter was worthy of the honor, the promise of Jesus to him concerning the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" was now wholly fulfilled. Peter had used one of the keys at Pentecost, and the other he used in the home of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert.—Matt. 16:17-19

It is well to note the manner in which the work of the Early Church started. Both Jews and Gentiles had definite assurance of their acceptance and of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Is it not reasonable to conclude that the closing of the work of this age will be just as definitely marked? We may not know how this will be accomplished even as the apostles did not know in advance how their work would begin. However, this we do know, that the Truth of the Gospel of Christ is still being preached, one here and one there among Gentiles and Jews are still accepting it, and these are manifesting the evidence of the Holy Spirit's begetting in their lives. Because of this, we know that the door to the High Calling is not yet closed. (Rev. 3:7,8) Those accepting the Word of Truth now and making a full

consecration to the Lord, no matter how few these may be, can be assured by these facts and not permit the imaginings of others to rob them of their confidence and hope.

As the work of early Christians continued to expand into ever enlarging fields, it offered greater opportunities for them to sacrifice their lives in the service of the Truth and the brethren. (Phil. 2:15-18) Perhaps our flesh would like to be convinced that the work is now all over, but let us not yield to this cunning sophistry. As long as there is even one more saint of God to be reached by the message before the work of the present age comes to a close, it is our privilege to spread the Gospel far and wide that one may be found and blessed.—Matt. 24:14; Rom. 10:14-18

Another lesson to be learned from the experiences of Cornelius is that what we believe is essential to the development of our relationship with God. There is no doubt that the Heavenly Father was pleased with the devotional attitude of Cornelius, but the Holy Spirit was not given to him until he accepted the Gospel message. It does make a difference what we believe, and especially so today. God has given us the Truth that we may be sanctified by it. (John 17:17-20) Let us cherish that Truth and not treat it lightly or as something ordinary. Let us treasure it and use it to his glory.

Let us remember, too, that God's providences are overshadowing us, and that no matter what new experiences may rise before us, if we accept them by faith as from the Lord and make the best possible use of them, they will work together for our good. (Rom. 8:28) If we are ever inclined to be discouraged

let us think of Peter and Cornelius—indeed, of all God’s servants of the past. The God who blessed and kept them is keeping us, and will guide us to victory.

May we thus echo the words of the Apostle Paul: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”—vss. 37-39 ■