

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 13, Acts 10-11

6-Min. Video Overview

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All right, let's get right into it. We're about to unpack one of the most critical moments in the history of the early church. It's really the story of how a small, kind of exclusive Jewish movement completely exploded into a global faith.

You could even argue it's the one event that kept it from just fading away. And it all comes down to a single fascinating question. I mean, really think about that.

How does a group that is defined by really strict cultural and religious lines suddenly throw its doors open to the entire world? It seems impossible, right? You think that would take, I don't know, generations of debates and councils and all this slow, painful change, but that's not what happened. Nope. This whole transformation, this whole explosion, it happened because of one single encounter.

An encounter so improbable, so perfectly timed that the people who were there could only come to one conclusion. God himself had to be behind it. This is the story of two men who were never ever supposed to even meet.

To really get how revolutionary this was, you've got to understand the world they were living in. For the first Jewish followers of Jesus, there was this hard, bright line separating them from the non-Jewish world, you know, the Gentiles. It was a line that basically kept their movement and their message totally contained.

And look, these weren't just suggestions. These were the absolute core of their identity. Circumcision, that was the non-negotiable sign that you belong to God's people.

The dietary laws. These were so serious that generations before people had literally died rather than eat unclean food. And it all kind of boiled down to this idea of table fellowship.

You just did not share a meal with a Gentile. Why? Because to do so was to make yourself ritually unclean. This was the uncrossable line.

So with all that in mind, let's meet our two main characters. We've got a Roman and a Jew, and their paths are about to collide in a big way. So on one side, you have Cornelius.

He's a Roman centurion, an officer in the occupying army, but he's not your typical soldier. This guy is devout. He gives generously to the Jewish poor.

He even prays at the designated Jewish hours. He totally respects the God of Israel, but, and this is the key, he is still an uncircumcised Gentile. And then on the other side, you have Peter, the leader of the Jesus movement.

He is a devout Jew who has never, ever broken the dietary laws. For him, a Gentile's house is basically off limits. Unclean territory.

I mean, these two men could not be further apart. Now, Cornelius fit into this very specific category of people they called God-fearers. These were Gentiles who were really drawn to Judaism.

They'd go to the synagogue. They worshiped the one true God, and they tried to live ethical lives, but they hadn't taken that final irreversible step of conversion, circumcision. So they were respected for sure, but they were still on the outside looking in.

So how in the world do you get these two men in the same room? Well, in this story, it takes a literal act of God, not one, but two separate supernaturally timed visions. And the timing here is just unbelievable. Check this out.

At 3 PM, the Jewish hour of prayer, an angel shows up and tells Cornelius to send for a guy named Peter in Joppa, which is about 30 miles away. Then the very next day, at the very moment Cornelius' men are getting close to the city, Peter is up on a rooftop praying. The timing is just perfect.

So Peter's up there. He's hungry. He's waiting for lunch, and he falls into this trance.

He sees this giant sheet being lowered from heaven, and it is filled with every kind of animal you can imagine, including reptiles and birds that are explicitly forbidden by Jewish law. Then a voice tells him, get up, Peter, kill and eat. And Peter's reaction is exactly what you'd expect from a devout Jew his entire life.

It's this gut-level, horrified, no way. This command goes against everything he has ever known, everything he has ever practiced. It's a complete violation of who he is.

But the voice from heaven says it again and again; three times it drives the point home. And just as Peter is trying to figure out what this bizarre vision about food could possibly mean, there's a knock at the gate. It's the men from Cornelius.

And suddenly you can almost see the light bulb go on. Peter starts to realize maybe this vision isn't about food at all. Maybe it's about people.

The Holy Spirit then tells Peter to go with these men and not to hesitate. So Peter does something shocking. He invites these Gentiles to stay the night.

That's his first major transgression. And the next day he sets off for a Roman centurion's house. He's about to cross that uncrossable line.

Now, Peter knows this is a huge deal. He completely understands how controversial this is going to be. So he doesn't go alone.

He takes six other Jewish believers with him, which makes for a total of seven official witnesses. He is already preparing for the questions that he knows are coming his way. So Peter arrives; he walks into the Gentiles' home, and he starts to explain the message of Jesus.

But here's the crazy part. He doesn't even get to finish his sermon. The whole vibe in the room just changes.

He's interrupted not by a person, but by the Holy Spirit who just falls on every single Gentile in that room. And the evidence was just undeniable. Cornelius and his whole household, they start speaking in other tongues, which was the exact same sign that the Jewish apostles had received way back at the very beginning on the day of Pentecost for Peter and his six friends.

The conclusion was inescapable. God had just welcomed these Gentiles into his people on his own terms without them first having to become Jews. The door to the world had just been kicked wide open.

Well, as you can probably imagine, when word of this got back to the church leadership in Jerusalem, they were not happy, not at all. Peter was immediately called back to answer for what he did. And this was the formal charge.

It wasn't about what he preached. It was about fellowship. You crossed the line.

You went into an unclean house and even worse, you ate with unclean people. He had violated a core part of their religious and cultural life. But Peter's defense is just brilliant.

He doesn't get into a theological debate. He just tells them the story of what happened. He basically says, look, I had no choice.

It's an argument from divine necessity. Step one, God sent me a vision. Step two, the spirit told me to go.

Step three, God gave them the exact same spirit he gave us. And then his final question is just this rhetorical masterstroke. So who was I to stand in God's way? And faced with that, with that evidence, what could they possibly say? They were silenced.

This single event, this one encounter, it forced the entire Jerusalem church to accept a shocking brand new reality. This was the official decision that unlocked the future, confirming that God's plan was so much bigger than they had ever imagined. And the story of Cornelius, well, it wasn't just some isolated incident.

It became the blueprint, and it laid the groundwork for the next major hub of the movement, a place where this new reality was just going to become the norm. So you go to this bustling, totally multicultural city of Antioch, and you have Jewish believers who are now emboldened by what happened with Cornelius. And they start intentionally sharing their faith with their non-Jewish neighbors.

And right there for the very first time, a truly mixed community of Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus is born. And it was here in Antioch that they were first given a new name. The locals who were actually famous for their sharp wit probably came up with the nickname Christians.

It was likely a political label, kind of like you'd call supporters of Caesar Caesareans. It meant these people were partisans of Christos, the true king. So it may have started out as a nickname, maybe even a bit of an insult.

But the followers of Jesus soon took it and wore it with pride. So what started with just two men who were never ever supposed to meet became the catalyst for a global movement. This divinely forced encounter didn't just bend the rules.

It completely shattered centuries of tradition, creating something entirely new and ensuring that the message of this little Jewish sect would reach the entire world. Which, of course, leaves us with one final thought. What are the lines, the barriers that we draw today in our communities, in our societies, that this ancient story challenges us to reconsider?