

# ACTS 9: 32 – 10: 33

## THE DETAILS AND THE DOUBLE VISION

Not seeing the forest for the trees.

As I've tried to emphasize previously, if we are not careful, we can read over some major clues in the text that are there to show us something important. As we are so removed from the context of the text, we can easily not see what would have been easily apparent, if not transparent to the first century audience, whether Jew or Gentile. We have just come out of an amazing part of the narrative, with the conversion of Saul. We have seen God picking up Geographical cities which were outliers that linked back to Pentecost and the table of nations in the Genesis. And while we can't just look at Acts as merely an historical reportage of church history, we have become accustomed to sweeping events that have moved in a rapid manner. We have become accustomed to the main players in the book. We have Peter, James, John and Barnabus. And now we can add Saul, soon to be Paul to that list. We've come to see these guys, as well as others, as movers and shakers in the birth and spread of Christianity. And then, coming off Saul's conversion, Luke takes us back to Peter. It is evident why he has done that, but there is this section of 11 verses, before we get back to what some would call the "main story" that seems out of place. We can easily read over it, accept it as mere reportage of facts, as almost some filler, as if Luke needed to reach a quota of pages in his sequel to his Gospel. But that is not the case. These verses are here for a reason. And before we get too carried away with Cornelius and what he needs to hear from Peter, if we pay close attention, there are even more clues and questions to be asked and answered before Peter's revelation to all parties involved is made clear. So, with all that in mind, let's get into the text.

### **Acts 9:32 - 43**

***32 Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. 33 There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. 34 And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately. 35 So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.***

***36 At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. 37 But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 And since Lydda was near Joppa,***

***and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. 39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. 43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.***

We begin with Peter making his way along the west coast of Israel. Lydda was known in OT times as Lod, pronounced with a long 'o.' It is about 10 miles inland from the coast, just southwest of Joppa, which is near modern day Tel Aviv. Both of these places are just south of what is known as Sharon, or the plain of Sharon. They are all NW of Jerusalem.

Apparently, Peter has been on a crusade of sorts throughout this region and eventually made it to Lydda, where there were believers. Here, unfortunately, the word is translated as saints. It literally means "holy ones." "Saints" tends to be loaded with all sorts of theological and eschatological issues. "Holy ones" would be a more consistent rendering of the Greek, "Haggaoi." At any rate, Peter, in this vignette has come into the area and been told about a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for eight years. He simply went up to him and told him he was healed and now needed to make his bed. After that, many more in the town believed. Aeneas is a Greek name, and therefore was most probably a Hellenistic Jew, if not a Gentile. We can't be sure, but we have begun to see more Gentiles worked into the narrative. There is a question here which will be addressed shortly. We then see Peter work his way to Joppa.

The scene at Joppa is one of mourning. A disciple named Tabitha, (Aramaic name) also referred to as Dorcas, (Greek) had died. She was mourned by several widows and was noted for her sewing skills and her faithfulness to her faith and community. She was most likely a widow herself as those were her immediate mourners. Widows have become a large and prominent group within the early church. And it is here that I want to begin to answer why I believe Luke has put these two otherwise disconnected stories within the wider framework of what the book of Acts is trying to get across to us. These two stories, first Aeneas and then Tabitha, refer to those who were normally on the fringes of society. Aeneas was a paraplegic and thusly would have been a begger, unless he had wealthy family to support him. And even if he had support from a family of modest means, he would still have had to beg, to some degree. Tabitha was a widow and would have most likely been supported by the local synagogue as we studied a couple of weeks ago. She is noted for her work in the community and her abilities to sew and mend garments, mostly by her fellow widows, though I imagine some of her customers would have greatly missed her.

The important thing here is that, in comparison to Peter, James, John and Saul, these are what some would refer to as “little people.” They aren’t the ones going around healing the sick, getting arrested and preaching life-changing sermons. Aeneas sits around begging and Tabitha humbly and quietly mends garments and does whatever else she can in the community. But they were both believers, regardless of their place in society. And I think this is why these two stories are included by Luke. He wants to let us know that there are no “little people” in the kingdom of God. They both did what they knew and what they could, and they did these things to “the glory of God.” This is important to all of us, especially in a church world where pastors can become almost like rock stars and churches can rise and/ or fall by the allegiance of and to the “cult of personality.” As a pastor friend of mine was often heard to say, **“there are no A-postles or B-postles.”** In the kingdom of God, everyone has innate value. All of us have a vocation and we all have our place. No matter what we may think, the seamstress, the cook, the janitor, the ditch-digger are all equal to the teacher, pastor, professor, apologist, doctor or lawyer when we do what we do to the glory of God. That is what believers do. We do whatever it is we do, all for the glory of God.

There is another question that Luke doesn’t answer for us. Why these two people specifically? I’m sure Aeneas wasn’t the only paralytic in town. And I’m quite sure Tabitha wasn’t the only person to have died, especially among the believing community. We aren’t told that Peter went from house to house healing everyone. Why are some visited, and others aren’t? Why are some healed, and others die? We don’t know. In the end we have to chalk it up to the sovereignty of God. And that is something we have to accept as Christians. After all, if God is King, then he is in charge. And if he is just, then He has a reason for this. We must learn to live with this. As former boss once told me, “When you own the candy store, the jelly-beans are free.” At any rate, many more believed, so Peter decided to stay in town for a while. We are told that he stayed with Simon, who was a tanner. That is interesting because tanners normally worked with pigskins, which were unclean. Simon may have been a Gentile, or he may have been a kosher tanner, if there was such a thing. We aren’t told. But either way, it sets us up for what will happen next. Can you see how easily we can read over important things, details which are meant to set up the next part of the story? This is a prime example.

***1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius!”***

***4 And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, “What is it, lord?” So he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. 6 He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.” 7 And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. 8 So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.***

Caesarea was a port city built by Herod, about 30 miles north of Joppa. It was also a garrison town, a military town. The port brought in goods and taxes. And with the transient nature of the town – sailors and merchants, a military presence was much needed. The Roman army and navy also made use of the port. The fact that Cornelius, a centurion, (had 100 men directly under his command) was stationed there, says that he was a respected officer and certainly worth his salt.

As you are probably aware, there were tensions between the Romans, Gentiles and the Jews. The fact that the Jews were prohibited from eating pork, as well as many other types of meat enjoyed by other groups, and the fact that they didn't partake in the local festivities, which were often and given over to the worship of pagan gods, as well as the fact that they insisted on taking the Sabbath day off, caused them to be seen as strange and anti-social to those around them. Of course, these things were put in place by God in order that they would stand apart as God's chosen people. But God is about to blow all of that out of the water later on in this chapter. God is not contradicting Himself. Just as a mother who sees her son about to cross a busy street and yells for the child to stop, only to tell him to go ahead and cross after the traffic has passed doesn't contradict herself. God set Israel up in this way in order to show them as well as Himself as different from everyone else and all of the false gods known to the other nations. In the OT, God had told Israel to halt and not cross the street, but now, He is telling them that it is safe to cross the boundaries due to the work of Jesus and His resurrection.

Cornelius was a "God-fearer." This meant that he had come to worship the God of Israel. But he would forever be an outsider to most of the Jewish community. No matter how nice he was and no matter how much he gave to the poor in the Jewish community, he could never be seen as a complete Jew. A proselyte though he was, he was still not, nor could he ever truly be one of them. He was, in a sense, somewhat below the status of Aeneas and Tabitha. That is, until God gives the decree for His people to cross that proverbial street. We will see that next week. But Cornelius had broken the stereotype of what a Roman, let alone a soldier was seen to be. And his faith was rewarded by God. An angel came to him at 3 pm one day and told him to send for Peter, who was in Joppa. Cornelius needed to hear what God wanted to say. And Peter was the instrument God chose to use – as was Cornelius.

***9 The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10 Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."***

***14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."***

***15 And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." 16 This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.***

**17 Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. 18 And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.**

**19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. 20 Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."**

**21 Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?"**

**22 And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them.**

**On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.**

Peter was praying at noon the day after the angel appeared to Cornelius. We sort of have an instance of "double vision." Cornelius had one and now Peter was having one. His hunger may have played a part in his vision, as he was hungry. It is funny how God can use any circumstance to grab our attention. In the vision, a sheet came down, gathered together at the corners and then unfolded showing many different types of animals. Most of which were considered unclean. Three times Peter was told to, "Rise, kill and eat!" Peter, possibly thinking he was being tested, declared that he never ate anything unclean. God then told him not to call anything He had cleansed, "common - that is, unclean." The sheet was then taken back up into Heaven.

While Peter was pondering this, the party sent by Cornelius arrived and asked to see him. Peter was told to go with them, 'doubting nothing.' He complied the next day. At this point, Peter doesn't know what Cornelius wants and Cornelius doesn't know what Peter is going to say. But in faith, they set out the next day on the road back to Caesarea.

**24 And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. 28 Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. 29 Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?"**

**30 So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, 31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the**

*sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.’ 33 So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”*

***Preaching to Cornelius' Household***

***34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. 36 The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all— 37 that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. 43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”***

Peter and company reached Caesarea the next day and Cornelius immediately fell down at his feet. Peter immediately told him to stand. He was a mere man just as was Cornelius. Don't miss the fact that Cornelius had gathered friends and family together. Most of these were most likely also God-fearers. They were about to have church. Peter begins by addressing the elephant in the room. Jews were not supposed to even enter the home of a Gentile. But Peter recounts his vision and what it meant. God no longer distinguishes between Gentile and Jew. The Kingdom of God is circumcision neutral. There are now only believers and non-believers. Ethnicity and diet are no longer restrictions for entering the Kingdom of God. Later, Paul will define Israel as all who believe in Jesus, no matter their genealogy. All believers become the children of God.

***44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.***

***Then Peter answered, 47 “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.***

As Peter delivered his message, his revelation, the hearts of those in Cornelius' household must have been convicted because then and there, without an altar call or invitation, the Holy Spirit fell and the began to speak in tongues and praise God! As we have seen previously, and see here, this legitimized the Gentiles as children of God.

Peter's vision had manifested in a way that he, just the day before, couldn't have imagined. And because of that, he baptized them all. And just like that, God opened the door for what we will see throughout the rest of the book of Acts and the New Testament. Faith in Jesus, without circumcision or the Law was all that was necessary to become a child of God.

Nowadays, the word 'tolerance' is thrown around a great bit. And there are those who have attempted to use these verses to say that God accepts everyone and that, essentially, all roads lead to Heaven. But nothing could be further from the truth. It's not so much that God accepts us as we are, but that He invites us as we are. But that invitation always involves the transformation that is acted out by repentance, forgiveness and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Think about it. If Cornelius was just fine as a God-fearer, then why all the fuss to have Peter go and see him in order to tell him about Jesus?

And later we will see the new problem that arises from this revelation. The Gentiles would be accepted, but there was the thinking that they would then in turn have to become Jews. But that isn't the case either. True faith in Jesus was/ is enough. But that faith is more than the saying of a prayer. It is a true conversion. A different way of life in a new family, the family of God.

There are no "little people" in the Kingdom/ family of God. God reaches out to us as individuals, in many ways. He uses us as individuals to reach out to others, in many different ways. And while He invites us as we are, wherever we are, whomever we are, true faith results in a true conversion of repentance, and the filling of the Spirit, which leads to a transformed life.

God – reaching out to all of us, no matter what our station or status is why these stories of otherwise unknown individuals are placed here. And we can't let the details escape us. God's speaking to us and those to whom we are to minister, is so often in the details.