

Adult Teaching Resources

May 19, 2019



Easter Season (April 21-June 2)

Resurrection Realities

Acts 9:1-20 (RCL 1-6, 7-20) – “Blind Devotion”

Acts 9:36-43 – “Shocking Faith”

Acts 11:1-18 – “Stunned Silence”

Acts 16:9-15 – “Eager Acceptance”

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Stunned Silence

Acts 11:1-18

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” Acts 11:17

Who gets to be included? That question has challenged and frustrated Christian believers throughout the ages.

Today, we explore Peter’s vision, and God’s words to him, about who was included into the fellowship.

Opening

After everyone arrives, remain in the large group.

Our Lesson Writer shared a personal story from his past when he tried to do the right thing by welcoming the local football team into the segregated congregation.

Read the story out loud. Then, ask your class to share any similar experiences they encountered in their faith journey.

What was the situation?

What was the controversy?

What happened?

What was the push back?

What ultimately happened?

Where was God in the situation?

Spend time in conversation before moving to the Bible.

Reading the Bible

What did the apostles and believers in Judea hear? (That the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God)

How did the circumcised believers criticize Peter? (They said, “Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?”)

What image did Peter see in his vision? (A large sheet coming down from heaven)

What did he see with the sheet? (Four-footed animals)

What did the voice say? (“Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”) How did Peter respond? (“By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”)

What response came from Heaven? (“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”)

What did the spirit tell Peter? (To go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us)

What did the angel say? (“Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.”)

What did Peter remember as he began to speak? (The word of the Lord.) What words did he remember? (John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.)

How did they react to Peter’s words? (They were silent. And they praised God)

Making Connections

What rules of being a Christian did you learn growing up? How did following, or not following, those rules affect you and the way you viewed others?

Have you ever been chastised for spending time with an unchristian group? What happened?

Has God ever spoken to you in a vision or a dream? What did you hear? What did you do about it? How did you know it was God?

When has your belief system been challenged by a teaching that ended up being right or true? What was your original belief? What was the challenging teaching? What did you learn?

Our Lesson Writer explains Peter’s understanding of the new news, “In Peter’s mind, not making a distinction extended beyond preaching. He took the vision and the Spirit’s word as divine permission to eat with and associate with the Gentiles just as he would with fellow Jews.” What does your church do to live out Peter’s vision? How does your church do more than preach?

Making Connections *continued*

What does “receiving the Spirit” mean to you? What does it look like? What is the end result?

Our Lesson Writer says, “Peter recognized that it was both possible and foolish to get in God’s way. He had a personal history of challenging Jesus’s decisions and being put in his place. Peter had learned to stand back and listen when the Spirit spoke.” When have you been foolish and got in God’s way? What happened?

Have you ever experienced a situation where after someone spoke a difficult truth, only silence remained? What was the difficult truth? What was the controversy? What happened?

So What?

Remaining in the large group, share these words from our Lesson Writer:

“Overcoming prejudice is not easy, but it is at the heart of the Gospel - and the whole gospel is for all people.”

In what ways do you or your church still hold onto prejudices?

Why is it that we still do hold onto prejudices?

What do we think is to be gained by holding them?

What would your world look like if those prejudices were removed?

What would it take for that to happen?

Spend time in large group conversation, making sure to make the connections between the passage and daily living.

The Challenge

This week take the first step in removing your individual prejudices so that the gospel can be heard and embraced by everyone.

Prayer

God of love, not only do you love us and care for us, you call us to love others. All others. Help us to get out of our way and live a life full of love. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Caesarea Maritima—The city Paul visited was sometimes called Caesarea Maritima to distinguish it from Caesarea Philippi, built by Herod Phillip II in the north of Galilee and named for himself and for Caesar Augustus.

Caesarea Maritima was built by Herod the Great between 22 and 10 BCE, expanding an old Phoenician naval port. Herod built a large seaside palace complete with pools, mostly lost to the ocean today. The city later became the provincial capital of Judea and was the official residence of the Roman procurator Antonius Felix and prefect Pontius Pilate.

Caesarea became a major port city, boasting a large theater and two hippodromes (stadiums used for chariot races), among other impressive structures.

As the seat of Roman government in Palestine, Caesarea would have been home to many Roman soldiers, including the centurion Cornelius, an early believer.

In the photo above, Herod’s palace is to the left and half of a hippodrome to the right (much of it was lost to the sea). A long breakwater once provided safe harbor for many ships in what appears to be a bay. The structure in the distance was built by the Crusaders as a fort.



Different texts—There is some question about whether Peter came quickly on his own to speak with the “party of the circumcision,” or whether he was actually recalled to Jerusalem by the unhappy group. The best Greek texts suggest that Peter returned to Jerusalem almost immediately, but a popular variant puts some distance between the conversions and the controversy.

The oldest and generally most reliable text families imply that Peter returned quickly, but the “Western Text” (primarily represented by the fifth or sixth century manuscript *Codex Bezae*) expands v. 2 as follows: “Peter, therefore, for a considerable time wished to journey to Jerusalem; and having called to him the brethren and having strengthened them [he departed], speaking much throughout the country [and] teaching them; he also went to meet them and reported to them the grace of God. But the brethren of the circumcision disputed with him, saying. . .” (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975], 382).

Digging Deeper *continued*

Witnesses—In v. 12, Peter’s reference to “these six brothers” who had accompanied him reveals his interest in having others corroborate his story. He had apparently persuaded six believers from Joppa to accompany him to Caesarea, where they witnessed the same outpouring of the Spirit that Peter had seen. Speaking of “these six brothers” suggests that Peter had also brought them with him to face the inquisitors in Jerusalem.

In Jewish law, two witnesses were required to ascertain a story’s truth. Peter had brought three times that many witnesses in addition to himself: seven witnesses in all.

One time?—Some commentators have noted that the verb for “has given” is not in the perfect tense, as it is usually translated, but is an aorist. The perfect tense in Greek suggests something that took place in the past and continues to be true, while the aorist often (but not always) indicates more of a “one time” event. This may imply that the church leaders did not acknowledge a broad acceptance of Gentiles, but regarded the Cornelius incident as an isolated event.

Style—Peter’s accusers had little choice but to acknowledge that Gentiles could be saved and even blessed by the Spirit, but they still had problems with the idea of eating together with non-Jews. Does this have something to say to those who think all persons can believe, but shouldn’t necessarily worship or work together?

Contemporary believers prefer a variety of styles of worship, and not always along racial lines. Some tend to a solemn and liturgical style, while others are much more lively. Some expect the congregation to be quiet while the minister speaks, while others encourage congregational input. Some prefer hymns, while others prefer praise songs. Some stand still, while others clap, raise their hands, or even dance in place. Yet, we all worship the same God. Is there value in holding joint services so that each group can appreciate and validate the other’s style of worship?

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

What's the real issue?

Peter's accusers were so grounded in their traditional way of life that they could not imagine something as radical as eating non-kosher food, especially at the same table with Gentiles. One has to wonder how much of the issue was truly related to religious faith, and how much of it was cultural – and how much came from the fear of losing control.

Readers of a certain age may remember a culture – at least in the American South – of racism so overt that African-American citizens were not allowed to eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same fountains, or use the same restrooms as white people. I can remember watching as our segregated grade-school janitor, a gentle man named William Gartrell, would clean the water fountain used by the white children, but when he wanted a drink, he had to direct the water into a cup. For people raised in that culture, it seemed a normal way of life. When the schools were integrated years later, many white students rebelled at the idea of eating at the same table – or even in the same lunchroom – with black students.

It was common for segregation and even slavery to be defended biblical principles, often based on horrid misinterpretations of texts such as the so-called “curse of Ham” in Genesis 9:20-27 – a story in which the curse actually falls on Ham's son Canaan, and the contextual purpose of it was to justify the Israelites' later attempts to overrun and enslave the Canaanites. Teachings and laws forbidding intermarriage between races were based on texts warning Hebrews against marrying people who worshiped other gods.

Today we can see such scruples for the blatant racist attitudes that they revealed – the underlying belief that white people were inherently superior to dark-skinned people. Sadly, contemporary politics have made it clear that racial prejudice and a belief in white supremacy is still alive and well – and not just in the South.

Those who opposed fellowship between Jews and Gentiles could claim religious underpinnings for their views, based largely on priestly writings that focused on purity and pedigree as a way of preserving Hebrew faith and culture in the midst of a multicultural and multi-religious world in the postexilic period.

Both Jesus' willingness to eat and drink with people considered unacceptable to the pious and God's clear desire to bless all believers with the Spirit introduced a new age in which the walls between people from different cultural backgrounds could – and should – be broken down. The “circumcision party” resisted, not because they could rightly make a scriptural case for their exclusivism, but because they could not get past their cultural upbringing, and because they feared losing control. There were many more Gentiles than Jews in the world. What if the Christian movement spread? What kind of new ideas might come into the church if those Gentiles ever found themselves in places of leadership?

The Hardest Question *continued*

Texts such as this one challenge us to take a hard look at our own lives, our prejudices, our unspoken justification of exclusion over acceptance, and our desire to maintain control, both in church and beyond the church.

When we find ourselves feeling even a little bit superior to others because of their race or ethnic background, we would do well to remember Peter's experience. "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us" (Acts 11:12), he reported. "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Do exclusivist attitudes against those who are different hinder the work of God today?