

NT LESSON 30

“GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS”

Acts 10-14; 15:1-35
by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: Prophets make *right* turns. Of course they never make *wrong* ones. But when the requirements of the kingdom, or the preparation of the people, or the will of God, require a change of course, the Lord will reveal the need to his prophets and they will lead the church in new and often unexpected directions.

Consider as an example what happened on the 8th of June, 1978. It was on that day that the blessings of the priesthood were extended to all worthy males. The record of this wonderful event is found in Official Declaration 2 in the Doctrine and Covenants. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing? Nearly everyone who was old enough remembers.

Almost everyone in the kingdom rejoiced. Almost. There were some—relatives of mine among them—who were certain that President Kimball had just led the Church into apostasy.

The announcement of polygamy as a doctrine, and the subsequent revocation of that duty caused some members of the Church to reexamine their bearings and to turn away from the pathway marked by prophetic announcements.

Similar feelings affected the Early Church when Peter announced that the gospel was to be taken to the Gentiles. And in that day as in our own there seem to have been those who would not comply, but followed right out of the Church their own perceptions of what the will of God ought to be.

In lesson 30 we will discuss that new revelation and its impact on the church and its members.

1. PETER LEARNS IN A VISION THAT THE GOSPEL SHOULD BE PREACHED TO THE GENTILES.

Turn to Acts 10 and answer the following questions:

1. Who was the man who lived in Caesarea? (vs. 1)

2. He was a Roman soldier. What rank did he hold? (vs. 1)
3. From verses 2-4, identify the qualities this man possessed.
4. What did Cornelius see? When did he see this? (vs. 3)
5. (Vss. 5-9) Who did the angel tell Cornelius to send for?
6. Look at your Bible Maps. How far is it from Caesarea to Joppa?
7. At noon the next day, what was Peter going to do? Where? (vs. 9)
8. Peter was famished, but what happened while he was waiting to eat? (vs. 10)
9. Review in verses 11 and 12 what Peter saw in this vision.
10. What command did Peter receive? (vs. 13)
11. Peter was starving. Why didn't he obey? (vs. 14)
12. Cross reference verse 15 to verses 28, 34, and 35 in the same chapter and note what the voice said to Peter in verse 15.
13. What happened while Peter was trying to figure out the meaning of his experience? (vs. 17-19)
14. Peter met the men from Caesarea and put them up for the night. Where did they all go the next day? (vs. 24)
15. When Cornelius met Peter, what did he try to do? (vs. 25)
16. It was unlawful for a Jew to keep company with a Gentile. Why was Peter willing to do so? (vs. 28)
17. Peter asked why he had been sent for and Cornelius told of his vision and instruction. How many days had it been? (vs. 30)
18. When Peter heard Cornelius' story, what did he say? (vs. 34)
19. According to verse 35, what nations is the gospel for?
20. In verses 36-43, Peter preaches a brief sermon about the Savior. Who does Peter say can receive a remission of sins through the name of Christ? (vs. 43)
21. All of this is most unusual and amazing, because members of the Church have always believed that the gospel is only for the descendants of Abraham. But God is about to change all of that. What wonderful thing happens in verse 44?
22. How did those of the circumcision (the Jews) react when the Holy Ghost came upon the Gentiles? (vs. 45)
23. What gift of the Spirit did the Gentiles receive? (vs. 46)
24. What question did Peter ask of those believers with him? (vs. 47)
25. What did Peter command the Gentiles to do? (vs. 48)

Can you see the parallels between these events and the landmark experience of June 1978? Note the following from President Kimball

speaking to saints in South Africa.

As you know, on the ninth of June a policy was changed that affects great numbers of people throughout the world. Millions and millions of people will be affected by the revelation which came. I remember very vividly that day after day I walked to the temple and ascended to the fourth floor where we have our solemn assemblies and where we have our meetings of the Twelve and the First Presidency. After everybody had gone out of the temple, I knelt and prayed. I prayed with much fervency. I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God. I knew that we could receive the revelations of the Lord only by being worthy and ready for them and ready to accept them and put them into place. Day after day I went alone and with great solemnity and seriousness in the upper rooms of the temple, and there I offered my soul and offered my efforts to go forward with the program. I wanted to do what he wanted. I talked about it to him and said, "Lord, I want only what is right. We are not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want only the thing that thou dost want, and we want it when you want it and not until."

We met with the Council of the Twelve Apostles, time after time in the holy room where there is a picture of the Savior in many different moods and also pictures of all the Presidents of the Church. Finally we had the feeling and the impression from the Lord, who made it very clear to us, that this was the thing to do to make the gospel universal to all worthy people. You will meet this situation undoubtedly as you bring the gospel to them on condition that their lives can be changed.

I anticipate the day when the gospel, that has come to you and your families and has transformed your lives, will begin to transform their lives and make new people out of them. They become people who will love the Lord and who will make the same sacrifices that you make (*Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, pp. 450-451).

2. PETER IS MIRACULOUSLY FREED FROM PRISON.

Acts 12 is a most intriguing chapter. In the early verses we learn that Herod (Agrippa 1, grandson of Herod the Great)

stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword (Acts 12:1,2).

This act was greeted by the Jews with such delight that Herod also arrested Peter, with the intent do treat him as he had treated James, following the feast of Passover (see Acts 12:3,4).

But the intended execution did not take place at this time. Notice in verse 4 how many roman soldiers were guarding Peter. Notice what happened the night before Herod intended to “bring Peter forth to the people” that prevented the death of the chief apostle?

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him (Acts 12:6-10).

Why? Why would the Lord allow Herod to put James to death and then, in the case of Peter, intervene in so many miraculous ways to preserve him? Clearly we do not know all the answers.

Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend (Mosiah 4:9)

However, some important lessons suggest themselves, growing out of this seeming contradiction, and they are lessons we ought to take note of.

1. Not all the problems of mortality make sense to mortals. If we expect that God should always act in the same way we would act, we are destined to have some serious disappointments during our lives.
2. God sometimes allows the wicked to impose their wickedness on the righteous for this reason:

[God] doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day (Alma 14:11).

Herod did receive a rather dramatic judgement in Acts 12:21-23.

3. Our experiences are personalized. Howard W. Hunter observed:

Obviously, the personal burdens of life vary from person to person, but every one of us has them. Furthermore, each trial in life is tailored to the individual's capacities and needs as known by a loving Father in Heaven. (Howard W. Hunter, "Come unto Me," *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, p.18.)

Elder McConkie said it this way

Our Eternal Father knows all of his spirit children, and in his infinite wisdom, he chooses the very time that each comes to earth to gain a mortal body and undergo a probationary experience. Everything the Lord does is for the benefit and blessing of his children. And each of those children is subjected to the very trials and experiences that Omniscient Wisdom knows he should have. (*The Millennial Messiah*, p.660,661.)

4. God answers prayers. Acts 12:5 informs us that Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church

unto God for him.” We would suppose that prayer was also made for James, if there was time enough between the arrest and the crucifixion, but there may not have been time to organize a prayer vigil. The record suggests that Peter would have been killed at once except for the Feast of the Passover.

3, SAUL (NOW KNOWN AS PAUL) AND BARNABUS PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES.

The revelation received by Peter regarding the Gentiles did not immediately change the attitudes and actions of all church members.

Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only (Acts 11:19).

Notice that it was during this time that church members were first called Christians (see Acts 11:26).

Paul and Barnabus were called to missionary service in Acts 13:2,3. This is not the first preaching Paul will do, but it is apparently his *first missionary journey*, and is always referred to by that name. Who called Paul in 13:2? Who set my apart in 13:3? Paul was probably not an apostle at this time. Otherwise he would not have been set apart by local leaders.

When the missionaries came to Paphos on the island of Cyprus, they encountered a sorcerer named Elymas, who tried to interfere with the efforts of the missionaries to convert a local leader. But Paul, filled with the Holy Ghost, responded:

And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand (Acts 13:10,11).

We must never discount the hand and active intervention of God in this

work. Investigators, including Sergius Paulus, are his children, and that person who tries to prevent repentance and redemption will someday, soon or late, face the wrath of God.

When Paul and his companion arrived at Antioch of Pisidia, there was a great stirring among all the people. The Gentiles wanted to hear the word the next sabbath that was preached to the Jews (see 13:42). Note the reaction of the Jewish population to this new missionary method:

And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming (Acts 13:44,45).

And then it happened! Paul's declaration to the envious Israelites would have eternal implications for a great portion of God's children.

Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, *we turn to the Gentiles*. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, *I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth*. (Acts 13:46, emphasis added).

Many Gentiles believed, but the Jews were furious and the missionaries were expelled from the city (see 13:50).

At Iconium, "a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1), but again the "the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren" (Acts 14:2). When they were informed that an attempt would be made to stone them (see Acts 14:5,6), they fled to Lystra and Derbe and preached there.

Have you noticed a pattern of persecution in this missionary journey. In every city, opponents have arisen to impede the work and challenge the missionaries. And this will continue. If this did not happen, we would be surprised. That being who has opposed the work from the beginning of time

will continue to act in opposition in every heart and home and city and country. I have often reflected that the experience of the first missionaries in Great Britain with their vision of the multitudes of evil spirits was a wake-up call and a warning from God to every missionary in this dispensation that the persecutions experienced by Paul will continue in our own day.

The following is the account from Great Britain. It is a bit long, but it is worth having, and it does help us understand what happened to Paul during his journeys. This version comes from *Church History and Modern Revelation* by Joseph Fielding Smith, pp. 98,99.

It is recorded that about daybreak Sunday, July 10, 1837, Elder Isaac Russell who had been selected to preach at the Obelisk in Preston marketplace that day, and who occupied the second story of the lodging of the elders in Wilford Street, went up to the third loft where Elders Hyde and Kimball were sleeping, and called upon them to pray for him, that he might be delivered from the evil spirits that were tormenting him to such a degree that he felt he could not live long unless he obtained relief. The story is a most interesting one, but one that chilled the blood of the elders. It is told as follows by Elder Kimball:

"I had been sleeping on the back of the bed. I immediately arose, slipped off at the foot of the bed, and passed around to where he [Elder Russell] was. Elder Hyde threw his feet out, and sat up in the bed, and we laid hands on him, I being mouth, and prayed that the Lord would have mercy on him, and rebuke the devil.

"While thus engaged, I was struck with great force by some invisible power, and fell senseless on the floor. The first thing I recollected was being supported by Elders Hyde and Richards who were praying for me, Elder Richards having followed Russell up to my room. Elders Hyde and Richards then assisted me to get on the bed, but my agony was so great I could not endure it, and I arose, bowed my knees and prayed. I then arose and sat up on the bed, when a vision was opened to our minds, and we could distinctly see the evil spirits, who foamed and gnashed their teeth at us. We gazed upon them about an hour

and a half (by Willard's watch). We were not looking towards the window, but towards the wall. Space appeared before us, and we saw the devils coming in legions, with their leaders, who came within a few feet of us. They came towards us like armies rushing to battle. They appeared to be men of full stature, possessing every form and feature of men in the flesh, who were angry and desperate; and I shall never forget the vindictive malignity depicted on their countenances as they looked me in the eye; and any attempt to paint the scene which then presented itself or portray their malice and enmity, would be vain. I perspired exceedingly, my clothes becoming as wet as if I had been taken out of the river. I felt excessive pain, and was in the greatest distress for some time. I cannot even look back on the scene without feelings of horror; yet by it I learned the power of the adversary, his enmity against the servants of God, and got some understanding of the invisible world. We distinctly heard these spirits talk and express their wrath and hellish designs against us. However, the Lord delivered us from them, and blessed us exceedingly that day."

Elder Hyde supplemented this description as follows:

"Every circumstance that occurred at that scene of devils is just as fresh in my recollection at this moment as it was at the moment of its occurrence, and will ever remain so. After you were overcome by them and had fallen, their awful rush upon me with knives, threats, imprecations and hellish grins, amply convinced me that they were no friends of mine. While you were apparently senseless [page 100] and lifeless on the floor and upon the bed (after we had laid you there), I stood between you and the devils and fought them and contended with them face to face, until they began to diminish in number and to retreat from the room. The last imp that left turned around to me as he was going out and said, as if to apologize, and appease my determined opposition to them, 'I never said anything against you!' I replied to him thus: 'It matters not to me whether you have or have not; you are a liar from the beginning! In the name of Jesus Christ depart!' He immediately left, and the room was clear. That closed the scene of devils for the time."-D.H.C.

2:503. "Life of Heber C. Kimball," pp. 130-131.)

In Lystra these emissaries of Christ healed a cripple—a man lame from the womb—who immediately leaped and walked (see Acts 14:8-10). People would have worshiped them as Gods had not the elders intervened (14:11-16). Their preaching and their miracles touched the believing hearts and antagonized their enemies even more.

And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead (Acts 14:19).

But the disciples gathered, and no doubt blessed him, and he arose (see Acts 14:20). He rested the remainder of the day, and then “returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14 :21,22).

As I read about the almost immediate return of Paul and Barnabus to the work, I remembered the actions of the missionaries to the Lamanites. When Ammon came to rescue those who were in prison in Middoni, he found that

They were naked, and their skins were worn exceedingly because of being bound with strong cords. And they also had suffered hunger, thirst, and all kinds of afflictions; nevertheless they were patient in all their sufferings (Alma 20:29).

And what did they do when they were rescued? “They were fed and clothed. And they went forth again to declare the word” (Alma 21:14,15).

5.THE APOSTLES DETERMINE THAT THE GENTILES DO NOT NEED TO KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES.

One of the critical questions to confront the early church was this one: What must a non-Jew do to become a Christian. Of course the vast majority of the early converts were Jewish, and they brought with them into the Church all the cultural and social conditions of that heritage, including the requirements of the Law of Moses. And since almost all of them shared that background, there was little concern about conflict. But with the arrival of

the Gentiles, significant and divisive problems appeared. What were the new, non-Jewish converts to do about the Law of Moses. Many Jews believed that those requirements were a part of the creed of Christianity and that non-Israelites should be required to submit to the specifications of that law.

That attitude might be compared to a more modern condition. Should new Church members be required to *attend general conference*? Should they be expected to *participate in Boy Scouts*? What about *driving a car to Stake Conference*? You can imagine that Church leaders making such requirements of new members might cause some consternation. When Paul learned that Jewish leaders were expecting Gentile Converts to submit to the requirements of the Law of Moses, he spoke out boldly against such a practice.

AND certain men which came down from Judæa taught the brethren, *and said*, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles

As they journeyed to Jerusalem

they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and *of the apostles and elders*, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.

So the leaders of the church came together to consider the matter (see Acts 15:6). The result of this meeting was a decision that

that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and *from* fornication, and *from* things

strangled, and *from* blood (Acts 15:19 - 20).

The presiding brethren also

wrote *letters* by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren *send* greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, *Ye must* be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no *such* commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well (Acts 15:23 - 29).

This letter must have been the first proclamation of the Presidency and the Twelve. Even though the policy of the Church had been defined, this issue would continue to trouble the church for years to come.

CONCLUSION: While Paul and his companion were on their way home from their first missionary journey, they visited their converts and

ordained . . . elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, [and] they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed . . . And . . . sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles (Acts 14:26,27).

In opening “the door of faith unto the Gentiles,” Paul not only taught great gospel principles to believers, unbelievers, and investigators, he taught great gospel messages to missionaries. Next week we will review his second missionary journey and examine wonderful lessons from that

episode in the life of Paul.

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