

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS

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ACTS 10:1-11:18

AC 10:1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!” ⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

AC 10:7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. ⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” ¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

AC 10:16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. ¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.” ²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?” ²² The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.

AC 10:25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” ²⁷ Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

AC 10:44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Dr. Luke spends more time on the conversion of Cornelius than he did on most other subjects. He did so because he wanted to emphasize that the Gospel was not just for Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria, but also to the entire world. He did so first by showing how an Ethiopian eunuch had been saved. Then he showed how a radical Jew named Saul, a Pharisee, tried to destroy the church, but how this man from Tarsus, Syria, became Paul the missionary to the Gentiles. Now Luke emphasizes another conversion, that of Cornelius the Centurion. But he writes much more about this story than about the others. Therefore we must conclude that this conversion had an overriding importance in the mind of Luke. This morning let us look at the importance of the conversion of Cornelius.

The Conversion of Cornelius the Centurion had great importance because HE WAS A MAN OF IMPORTANCE. He was a Centurion of the Italian band, a captain of one hundred soldiers, and the century of soldiers was the backbone of the Roman army, the greatest army in the history of the ancient world. The entire band or battalion of which he was a part was made up of 6000 men, and in every band there were ten cohorts with 600 men. Cornelius was over 100 of these 600 men in his company.

Barclay tells us the qualifications for the centurion: “Centurions are desired not to be over-bold and reckless so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive to start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their posts.” These centurions were real leaders who were so committed that they would die rather than run. Their loyalty to Rome was absolute. They set the example for their men under them, and these 100 men saw a real and true and decisive leader when they saw Cornelius.

Sheridan was such a leader for the North during the great Civil War. He once rode into battle only to see his men running from the enemy. Standing up in the stirrups of his white steed and swinging his sword round and round above his head, he cried out, “Men, you’re going in the wrong direction.” Then he charged toward the enemy. His soldiers, seeing his bravery, followed him into battle and won the day.

A leader cannot hide from those he is trying to lead. He is either out front, or he is out. Cornelius knew this and so his actions were much louder than his words, and his men followed him. When words and deeds are one, people will follow. That’s why Jesus constantly invited His followers to follow Him. He once said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” He also said to His first followers, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” About two weeks ago Martha and I

attended the Gideon's banquet. One of the speakers said, "Jesus said follow me and I will make you fishers of men. If you are not fishing for men you are not following Jesus!" That striking statement had the effect of making me bolder in my own witnessing for Jesus. Remember, if you're not fishing you're not following.

Cornelius was also a 'religious' man who realized that the 'gods' of Greece and Rome were quite unreal. So, as the Real God was seeking him, he was also seeking God. There were three groups who worship this God, the Jews, the proselytes, and the God-fearers. Cornelius was a God-fearer. Cornelius was not the first God-fearer to hear the Gospel. Cornelius had not been circumcised, which to be a proselyte he would have had to go through that ceremony. But the fact that he believed in the God of the Jews, and worshipped Him, is proof that he was a good man with good insight in an era of strong polytheism.

In his commentary, Frank Stagg writes, "Cornelius was a Roman centurion who was a devout student of Judaism, but not a proselyte; he was not circumcised (cf. 11:3). Centurions have a good name in the new testament as well as in Roman history. Cornelius made no secret of his religious devotion and had influenced those near him for good. He gave alms liberally to "the people," that is, to the Jews, and he prayed constantly to God (10:2).

When Cornelius, the Centurion, the Gentile, the God fearer, had the vision and sent for Peter who was in the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa, thirty miles from Caesarea, he perhaps expected Peter sooner. But he patiently waited for four days until Peter came. During that time he informed all his family and his friends and those among the soldiers who would come and invited them to hear the news that the angel had spoken about in his vision.

God had sent an angel to visit Peter also. In his vision he saw the sheet let down from heaven full of unclean animals within. For three times this happened and Peter declared how loyal a Jew he was, not eating anything unclean and declared unclean by the Law. But God who commanded him to rise and eat, said to him, "What God has cleansed do not call unclean."

God was preparing both these important men for an important meeting that would change the lives of many.

The conversion of Cornelius was important also because it CHANGED THE LIFE OF ANOTHER VERY IMPORTANT MAN, OF SIMON PETER. Peter was the first anointed leader of the church and the first Pastor of the Jewish church in Jerusalem.

Despite the fact that the Spirit of God had pushed Peter to the forefront of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and even though Peter was travelling throughout Judea healing and preaching the Gospel, he was still much too narrow in his view of that Gospel. He had heard Jesus say, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations..."; had heard Jesus say, "Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the

earth”; but he was still narrow minded in his approach to the world. To Peter the world was made up of Jews and of Gentiles.

Barclay writes: “The strict Jew believed that God had no use for the Gentiles, that God’s favor extended to the Jews and to the Jews alone. Sometimes they even went the length of saying that help must not be given to a Gentile woman in the time of childbirth, because that would only be to bring another Gentile into the world.” Barclay also mentions the trance that prepared Peter to meet the men who would come to take him to the house of Cornelius. He says, “In the trance of moments Peter has to unlearn the habits and the traditions of a lifetime.”

We can understand Peter, for we too are shot through with diverse prejudices. Someone said that it is almost inconceivable that John Newton who wrote Amazing Grace could pray and sing praises to God with a shipload of slaves in the galley of his ship, bringing them to the shores of the new world to be no more than slaves to work the fields of the southern planters until they died and their children and grandchildren carried on their miserable work.

We are not so far removed from that today. I remember when I attended Southern Seminary in the mid 1960’s and talked to students from the deep south. I have heard them talk about never eating with blacks and never sleeping in the same room with the blacks. Moreover, I remember the first time I went to Florida in the early 1960’s, and seeing the bathrooms that said ‘white only’ and ‘negro only,’ I was appalled. The inconsistency of this I could not fathom, for I was not raised with that kind of prejudice.

Peter felt the same about the Gentiles that many still feel about the blacks in our country. I am certain that many white Americans detest our President because he is an African American. I am also certain that many U.K. basketball fans disliked the coaching of Tubby Smith because he was African American. In fact, at least one of my friends told me he would never watch another U.K. basketball game as long as a Negro was the coach. I could never feel this way. Whether white or black, the President is my President.

I was somewhat amazed at myself and the subtle prejudice that I had toward Mexicans before I went on a mission trip to Morelia, Mexico, this past July. My prejudice came from my ‘stereotypes’ of Mexicans in western movies and from illegal immigrants I’d observed. But when I lived among them for the time there, experienced their world, their love, their families, I grew to love them greatly. God has to teach us many things. In that sense we are very much like the young Apostle Peter.

We too need to learn such lessons as Peter learned. Peter had a great awakening. God had made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth. The word used of I perceive means literally ‘I am catching on.’ Peter was getting it, and before that eventful night, Peter got it. I wonder, have we got it yet?

Christian friends, wake up! We are being orchestrated by politicians to follow them instead of following God. There is such rabid disagreement in our nation. While I disagree with some of the policies of our president, I agree with McCain that President Obama is a 'good and a principled man.' Those Christians who call him names are breaking God's commandment and bearing false witness against a fellow human being. I love my President and will follow him as long as he is right. But when he is wrong, and he sometimes is, I will do the American thing and disagree with him. Abraham Lincoln said that he would stick by his ideas until someone showed him that he was wrong. I agree. Follow only Jesus Christ. Stick only to your own ideas. Remember that being Republican or being Democrat is not nearly as important as being a Child of God, and a Citizen of the Kingdom of God. We all need to outgrow our prejudices, don't we? I hope you agree that we do need to!

This was a seminal event for the church. The Ethiopian Eunuch would go to his home and not be heard from again; but Simon Peter was 'the rock' of the Christian Church. He had to break out of his prejudiced, Jewish-only Christianity. Peter was so important to the Church that had he not changed and seen the light and gotten the message, the very face of Christianity would have been changed. But once he saw the light, once the coin dropped, once God's vision dawned upon him, he became a changed man who was able to say Amen to the Gospel. He could affirm that the Gospel was to all men everywhere, and that not one human being was left out of the wonderful love and wonderful plan of God. The mystery of the ages had occurred and was to be known by the Gentiles as well. As a Gentile, I thank God that the Spirit of God gave spiritual clarity to Simon Peter.

But the greatest importance of the conversion of Cornelius was that a MAN, HIS FRIENDS, AND HIS FAMILY GOT SAVED.

The Spirit of God anointed, cleansed, and sanctified the Gentiles. But the most magnificent thing about it all was that people were found of God and found the God who had been seeking them. Nothing is so important as salvation.

They were saved by the preaching of the Gospel, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but to them which are saved, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Salvation came to the whole household. All of them, though they were Gentiles, started speaking in tongues and praising God just as did the Jewish followers of Christ on the day of Pentecost. Luke is making this a second Pentecost, the Pentecost of the Gentiles. True, other Gentiles had been saved. True, this was not the first time a God-fearer had been converted. But true also, this was the first time that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Pentecost, came upon the Gentile believers.

Notice that these people were first of all good people. God favored their goodness by sending an angel down to tell them the Truth about the Gospel. God favored

that goodness of these God-fearing-Gentiles by sending the great Apostle Peter to be the preacher who had been with Jesus and knew the Gospel well to tell them the good-news. But true also, their goodness, their leadership, their religion did not save them. Had they not accepted the Gospel they would not have been saved.

But Cornelius and his family and his friends were extremely sincere in wanting to know the truth; and when one wants to really know the truth, the Truth shall set that person free. Peter's sermon was quite simple. The truth of the Gospel is always simple. Sometimes people think it is too simple. Listen to what Peter said: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

AC 10:39 “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

AC 10:44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Peter says first of all that Jesus was the Anointed One of God who went about healing and casting out demons and doing good things. Next, the people killed Him by crucifying Him on a tree. Next, God raised Him from the dead. Multitudes of witnesses testify to the fact of His resurrection and, according to Peter, the Apostles ate and drank with Him after the resurrection. Next, God commanded the Apostles to preach to the people and to testify that God appointed Jesus Lord of the living and the dead. Next, the prophets testified that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins in His Name.

And while Peter was still preaching, once the Gospel was told, the Lord started saving everyone there. Heaven came down and God's glory filled a multitude of souls.

Cornelius's conversion was extremely important to him. But his conversion was the key to the other conversions that occurred there that day. God doesn't just save us when He saves us. We are a link in the chain that reaches far beyond us. There are first our families. Thank God my children grew up in a Christian family. And now they are Christians. They had to believe just as their parents had to believe, and they did.

When you are converted your children will more than likely also be converted. When you become a Christian you are not saved in a vacuum. Your friends and

acquaintances, and others that need the Lord, will see your joy and find your Jesus. That is inevitable.

I think of myself in that light. When I got saved my gambling buddies were touched with my salvation. Some of them later became Christians. But who would have thought that I would come back to the same community in which I was saved, spend 45 years in Pippa Passes, and win, over those years, scores of community people and college students to the Lord? Who would have thought that my ministry would go far beyond my own community and my own life and touch thousands of Romanians for Jesus Christ? Who could have known that a little barefoot boy from Reed Branch in Hueysville, Kentucky, would have won several thousand Romanians to faith in Jesus Christ in 16 years of going on mission there? And many in Brazil and in Mexico! God be praised for all He has done through the power of the Gospel. You see, when one is saved, that is not just one, and that is not the end of it. Our conversion is like a pebble thrown into a stream that causes the concentric circles to reach all shores. And if we ourselves are not able to win many to Christ, our testimony often will. And even if we win one to Christ, that one may win thousands.

How important was the conversion of Cornelius and family and friends? God knows! Heaven knows! And that is the importance of his conversion.