

Cornelius

In Acts chapter 10 we find the remarkable story of the centurion Cornelius. When this story takes place the persecution of the church had already begun. Early Christians had started to flee from Jerusalem and travel to other cities, spreading the gospel along the way. Saul had just been converted to Christianity but wasn't a notable figure in the church. At this point the church consisted almost entirely of Jews – but that was about to change.

In this chapter the church is going to branch out to the Gentiles. There had already been a very small movement in this direction earlier in Acts when the Ethiopian eunuch was saved, but in this chapter God is going to move in a major way to bring the Gentiles into His fold.

Up to this point the disciples had focused their efforts on preaching to the Jews. The idea that God also wanted to save the Gentiles was a radical idea – but if the Jews had paid more attention to the Scriptures it wouldn't have seemed as strange. God put hints throughout the Old Testament that one day His people would be composed of both Jews *and* Gentiles. For example, take a look at what the prophet Isaiah had to say:

Isaiah 11:10: “And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek; and his rest shall be glorious.”

Isaiah 42:1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.”

Isaiah 49:6: “And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the

tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.”

God was clear that the Messiah wouldn't just be for the Jewish people. His plan was to save both Jews and Gentiles! His salvation was to extend “unto the end of the earth”. God wasn't just the God of the Jews. He was the Lord of everyone, and He desired to save people from every nation.

The Lord is going to shake things up and teach the early church that the Gentiles were also included in the faith. The way He was going to do that was through a centurion named Cornelius:

Acts 10:1-2: “There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.”

Cornelius was a remarkable man. Even though he was a Gentile he feared the Lord. In fact, the Bible says he was very devout. Not only did he pray, but he also gave generously to the Jews. This means he followed up his words with actions! He did more than just talk; he took action. This wouldn't have been a popular thing to do in those days – especially for a Gentile – and yet that's what Cornelius did.

How did Cornelius come to the faith? The Bible doesn't say. It's unlikely that the Jews had tried to convert him because the Jews minimized their dealings with Gentiles and didn't believe that Gentiles were also heirs of salvation. At this point in history they thought salvation was only for the Jews. Yet God shed His grace upon this centurion in a special and powerful way.

Incidentally, this isn't the first converted centurion that's

found in the New Testament. Jesus met one during His time on Earth and He was impressed by his great faith:

Matthew 8:10-12: “When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It's remarkable to realize that the only people Jesus praised for their great faith during His ministry *were all Gentiles*. The Jews showed very little faith in Him. Even His own disciples were rebuked for having little faith! The Gentiles showed a faith in Jesus that the Jews themselves lacked. Jesus told His disciples that many Gentiles would come into the kingdom and enjoy it while many Jews would be cast out. Why? Because *the Gentiles had faith* and the Jews did not.

The disciples must not have understood that message, though, because after the ascension of Christ they continued to minister strictly to the Jews. However, God was about to change that. When Cornelius prayed he saw a vision:

Acts 10:3-6: “He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee

what thou oughtest to do.”

Even though Cornelius was a devout man who loved God and feared the Lord it seems that he had heard nothing about Jesus or the way of salvation. When this centurion was praying the Lord did something remarkable: He sent an angel to give him a message.

It's interesting to note that God did *not* tell him the way of salvation. God didn't have the angel preach the gospel to him or tell him how to be saved. Instead God told him to go and talk to the disciple Peter, and Peter would tell him what to do.

Couldn't God have just told him how to be saved? Of course! But at this point in history that wasn't God's plan. You see, God was working through *the church* to bring the gospel to all nations. After all, that was the great commission that Jesus gave right before He ascended into Heaven:

Matthew 28:19-20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

During the church age it's the responsibility of the church to spread the gospel to the nations. God isn't going to do it for us! It's our solemn responsibility. God has given us a command and we must go and tell everyone the way of salvation.

However, one day that will change. During the tribulation period we're told that God is going to send an angel to preach the gospel to the whole world:

Revelation 14:6-7: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and

tongue, and people, Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.”

Why would God do this? Because during the tribulation the church will be in Heaven (because we will be raptured before the tribulation begins). By the time Revelation 14 takes place the two witnesses have been killed and the 144,000 Jews who were sealed and told to preach the gospel have been killed as well. Since all those whom God appointed to preach the gospel are no longer on earth, God sends an angel to preach the message to everyone.

In Acts, though, the church is still in the world. So God told the centurion to speak to Peter, and Peter would show him the way of salvation.

When the centurion heard this he immediately obeyed:

Acts 10:7-8: “And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually; And when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa.”

Since God told him to go talk to Peter, that's what he was going to do. The team was dispatched the very next day:

Acts 10:9: “On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:”

Meanwhile God was dealing with Peter. The Jews tried to minimize their dealings with Gentiles so Peter wasn't going to be

receptive to this request from Cornelius. There were Gentiles on the way to get Peter and bring him to Cornelius, but before Peter would go with them God needed to teach him a lesson.

As we saw earlier, God came to Cornelius while he was in prayer. God likewise comes to Peter while he's in prayer – but the message God brings was something Peter didn't expect:

Acts 10:10-13: “And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending upon him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.”

Peter prayed while he was waiting for the meal to be fixed, which meant he was hungry. During that time he fell into a trance and the Lord spoke to him. In Peter's vision he saw God provide him food, but to his surprise the food that God offered was unclean under the Mosaic Law. Although the Gentiles ate those animals, no observant Jew would have anything to do with it. Peter had no intention of eating the things he saw in the vision.

Under the Mosaic Law there were all sorts of restrictions about what foods people could eat. Deuteronomy 14 has a long list of dietary regulations that the Jews were required to follow. Certain animals were abominations and couldn't be eaten:

Deuteronomy 14:3: “Thou shalt not eat any abominable thing.”

People weren't free to eat whatever they wanted. For example, the Jews could only eat animals that met certain criteria:

Deuteronomy 14:6: “And every beast that parteth the hoof, and cleaveth the cleft into two claws, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, that ye shall eat.”

Animals that didn't meet this criteria (such as pigs) were forbidden. For example, you could only eat fish that had fins and scales. If the fish didn't have fins and scales then it was forbidden:

Deuteronomy 14:10: “And whatsoever hath not fins and scales ye may not eat; it is unclean unto you.”

There were many other regulations, but you get the point. Since Peter was a devout, law-abiding Jew, he knew better than to eat unclean animals. That's why when he saw the unclean beasts in the vision he refused to make a meal out of them:

Acts 10:14: “But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.”

Peter knew what the Mosaic Law required and he wasn't going to violate it. What God said next surprised him:

Acts 10:15: “And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

God said that He had cleansed those animals and they were no longer forbidden. These animals weren't unclean because God had cleansed them. The dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law were null and void. Things had changed.

God didn't tell Peter this just once. The Lord actually repeated the message *three times*:

Acts 10:16: “This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.”

There's something special about Peter and the number three, isn't there? Jesus told Peter in Matthew 26:34 that he would deny the Lord three times, and he did. In John 21 Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, and told him three times to feed His sheep. Now we see that God gave Peter this vision three times as well. The Bible tells us that things were to be established by two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:16). Well, here Peter had his three witnesses! There was no mistaking what was going on.

To us the message of the vision seems pretty clear: the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law were gone. Animals that used to be unclean were now fine. A new age had begun and there were some new rules. However, Peter was confused. He didn't understand what was going on:

Acts 10:17-18: “Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate, And called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there.”

While Peter was up on the roof confused, the men who Cornelius sent arrived at the house. God had given Peter the vision at exactly the right time. It was still on his mind when the Gentiles came looking for him. In fact, Peter was still thinking about it when the Holy Spirit told him to go with the men who had come looking for him:

Acts 10:19-20: “While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee

down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.”

Keep in mind that when this happened there was intense persecution going on and things were only going to get worse. Peter had already been arrested before, and he probably wanted to avoid that again if at all possible. When some Romans came looking for him his first thought may have been that he was going to be arrested again. Peter may not have gone willingly with these strangers unless God told him to – and that's exactly what God did. The moment these men arrived the Lord told Peter to go with them because God had sent them to him. Peter was told to not doubt or question what was going on because it was God's doing.

Peter was obedient. Instead of running for his life he went and talked with them:

Acts 10:21: “Then Peter went down to the men which were sent unto him from Cornelius; and said, Behold, I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?”

Peter wanted to know why they had come. Why had these Gentiles come to see him? God told him to go with these men but He didn't explained what was going on. The servants explained what had happened:

Acts 10:22: “And they said, Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that feareth God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by an holy angel to send for thee into his house, and to hear words of thee.”

The people who were praising Cornelius in such glowing terms weren't Cornelius himself, but his servants! It seems his servants held in high regard. They said he was a just man who

feared the Lord and had a good reputation among the Jews. This should have put Peter's mind at rest because he now knew he wasn't going into the hands of an enemy.

After Peter heard their story he invited the group inside (since it was late in the day). The following day he left with them, just as God had commanded:

Acts 10:23: “Then called he them in, and lodged them. And on the morrow Peter went away with them, and certain brethren from Joppa accompanied him.”

Cornelius was anxiously waiting for Peter to arrive. In fact, the centurion had gathered his family and friends so they could all hear the message Peter was bringing to them:

Acts 10:24: “And the morrow after they entered into Caesarea. And Cornelius waited for them, and he had called together his kinsmen and near friends.”

The centurion wasn't even saved yet and he was already spreading the message to others! He truly had a deep love of God and a heart for evangelism. However, what he lacked was knowledge. We can see this from the fact that when Peter arrived, Cornelius immediately fell down to worship him:

Acts 10:25-26: “And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man.”

As you can see, Peter immediately stopped him. Only the Lord may be worshiped – not men. But it seems Peter still didn't know why he was there. The first thing he did was ask why they had called for him:

Acts 10:28-29: “And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?”

This is what I was getting at earlier: the Jews didn't have dealings with the Gentiles. The Jews went to great lengths to not eat Gentile food, or keep company with Gentiles, or have anything to do with them at all if they could help it. But Peter now understood the meaning of the vision. The Gentiles were *not* unclean.

Cornelius explained what had happened. He told Peter that they wanted to hear the message he had to share:

Acts 10:33: “Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.”

This is amazing! Stop and think about this for a minute. Earlier in Acts the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to understand Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah. This Gentile centurion also wanted to hear the commandments of God. This means we've encountered two Gentiles who were eager to hear the Word. Do you know who did *not* want to hear that message? *The Jewish people*. No Jew *ever* sought the disciples the way these Gentiles did. It seems the Gentiles had a heart for God that the Jews lacked. The house of Cornelius was full of Gentiles who had gathered to hear what God had to tell them. They *wanted* to obey the Lord and do what was right. They wanted to serve Him with

their lives.

Peter was amazed. This taught him something he hadn't realized before:

Acts 10:34-35: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

Peter now understood that the gospel wasn't just for the Jews because God had made salvation available to all nations. God would forgive any who came to Him, who believed in Christ, and who repented of their sins. God wouldn't withhold His salvation from any people or nation but instead offered it freely to all. As we can see in verse 35, God will accept anyone who fears Him.

This may seem ordinary to us but it was huge news to Peter. This was a massive change in his thinking! Even though God hinted at this in the Old Testament, Peter had missed it. But now he saw what God was doing.

What did Peter do? He started telling them about Christ and how He was Lord of all:

Acts 10:36: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:)”

He told them of the great works that the Lord Jesus Christ had done:

Acts 10:38: “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.”

He told them about the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ:

Acts 10:39-40: “And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly;”

Who saw the risen Lord? Not everyone – only a few people. But Peter was one of those chosen few. He was an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord:

Acts 10:41: “Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.”

Peter told them that he had seen these events himself. He told them about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But that's not all. Peter also told them that this Jesus was the Judge, and all those who believed on Him would have their sins forgiven:

Acts 10:42-43: “And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.”

Notice what Peter did *not* do. Peter didn't say “Cornelius, God loves you very much and has a wonderful plan for your life.” That's what many preachers do today, but that's *not* how the apostles shared the gospel. In fact, they *never* took that approach!

Instead they preached Christ crucified. They told people about the life of Christ, the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. They told people that a terrible Day of Judgment was coming, and the only way to be forgiven of your sins was to believe in Jesus. They preached a gospel of judgment and repentance. They preached the cross and the blood. That's how they shared the gospel – and it was tremendously effective.

It was so effective that the people in the room immediately believed, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them:

Acts 10:44: “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.”

The people were saved *while Peter was still talking!* Peter hadn't finished his message yet but already they had accepted his message and believed in the Lord. They were saved *immediately* and received the Holy Spirit. Note that they were saved *before* they were baptized! Although baptism is a command from the Lord and is something we must do, baptism doesn't save you and isn't part of how you become saved. Instead it works the other way around: first we're saved and *then* we're baptized. This passage proves that rather conclusively.

When the Jews saw this they were astonished:

Acts 10:45: “And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Even though Peter had just said that God was no respecter of persons, it seems they didn't expect God to give the Gentiles the same spiritual gifts He had given the Jews. They seem to have thought that those gifts were only for the Jews. But God truly *was* no respecter of persons! God gave the Gentiles the same miraculous spiritual gifts He had given to the Jews. God was

showing them that both Jew and Gentile were equal in His sight:

Acts 10:46: “For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,”

The Gentiles were even speaking in tongues! God was teaching the Jews that the Gentiles were full partners in the church – not second class citizens, but recipients of the same grace and the same gifts.

The next step was to baptize the new converts:

Acts 10:47-48: “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.”

It was impossible for anyone to object to this. As Peter pointed out, since they had already been baptized with the Holy Spirit how could anyone say they couldn't be baptized with water as well?

This was a significant turning point in the early church. The Gentiles had been brought in and were now full recipients of the Lord's grace and salvation. In coming chapters the church would begin to minister to the Gentiles and all sorts of things would change – and it all started with the prayers of Cornelius.