

17. The Conversion of Cornelius and the Gentiles: Acts 10

Prior to Acts 10, the spread of the gospel followed progress through Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. In Acts 2, Jews from all over the world heard the gospel. In Acts 3, Peter preached the same gospel to the crippled and lame. In Acts 8, Philip preached to the Samaritans. Acts 9 closed with Peter in Joppa after working to spread the gospel to Judea. Now in Acts 10, the gospel goes to the Gentiles (the nations), making it available to everyone. The fulfillment of the great commission was at hand. Jesus had said in Matt 28:19-20:

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Indeed, Jesus had forecast that the gospel would go to the ends of the earth in Acts 1:8; "8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The last lesson left Peter in Joppa at the house of Simon the tanner according to Acts 9:43: "43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon." Joppa was a town on the Mediterranean Sea 35 miles south of Caesarea which was the capitol of the Roman province of Judea. It was the seat of government and the headquarters of Roman troops.

A Man Named Cornelius

Acts 10:1-3

10 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!"

Cornelius, as a centurion, was in charge of 100 men in the Italian regiment. In that day, Italy was only a province that surrounded Rome. When Cornelius and those converted with him went home, they would be in the most strategic place possible to spread the gospel *to the ends of the earth*—east to Spain, north to Gaul, and west to Greece. Rome and the province of Italy were the crossroads of the world.

Cornelius' character made him at once a God-fearing and moral man. That this good man needed the gospel in order to be saved testifies to what all such people must do to be saved. When the angel of the Lord addressed Cornelius, it started the sequence of events that would lead to the conversion of the Gentiles, but it alone did not save him.

Acts 10:4-8

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."

Cornelius' prayers and gifts did not save him; nor did God answer his prayer. The word *memorial* means "serving to preserve remembrance." Cornelius' good life, prayers, and gifts served to preserve God's remembrance of him. A man healed by Jesus declared in John 9:31, "31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will." God hears and remembers the prayers and alms of godly people; however that they all must obey the gospel to be saved. Cornelius and all moral people must be open to hear and obey the gospel of Christ. Jesus taught in Matt 7:7-8:

7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Acts 10:7

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.

Cornelius' asking, seeking, and knocking required him to send men to bring Peter from Joppa.

Peter's Vision

Acts 10:9-16

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."

16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Peter's vision was to convince him that Gentiles were not unclean. It was against the Jewish law to even associate with a Gentile. To persuade Peter otherwise, God used the analogy to food. Under the Law of Moses, God had restricted the Jews from eating certain foods. Leviticus 11 details these restrictions, which some think God instituted to impose health regulations on the Hebrews. For example, we now know that pork easily spoils. God was clear in his requirement that unclean things could not be eaten in Lev 11:46-47:

46 "These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves in the water and every creature that moves about on the ground. 47 You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten."

Peter was told three times: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." The application of the vision becomes obvious to Peter when he must apply the teaching to the Gentiles and their right to hear and obey the gospel.

Peter Receives the Men Sent by Cornelius

Acts 10:17-23a

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." 23 Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

As the narrative unfolds and the men tell Peter why they are there, they include a statement that shows the purpose of the vision, and indeed, what this episode teaches Peter and the rest of us. Peter asked them, "Why have you come?" The men replied telling him what the angel had said: "A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." All the visions aside, Cornelius had to hear the gospel and obey it to be saved. It is so in all the cases of conversion.

Peter Goes to Caesarea to See Cornelius

Acts 10:23b-26

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. 24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 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."

Cornelius greeted Peter with great respect, assembling relatives and friends to meet and hear him. When he fell down to worship Peter, Peter stopped him, making him stand up. When John responded similarly to an angel in Rev 22:8-9, he too was rebuked:

And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. 9 But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

Today, clerics and ecclesiastics of all stripes adorn themselves in elaborate garments and assume pious posturing to set themselves forward as someone approaching the divine. They take titles; such as, reverend and father. They people created by God to demean themselves as they bow and scrape and kiss hands and the rings on them.

People today willfully forget the teaching of Jesus in Matt 23:5-6;9-12:

5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; . . .

. . . 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Neither Peter nor John's angel from heaven made this arrogant mistake. "Stand up!" Peter commanded. "Worship God!" concluded the angel.

Acts 10:27-29

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?"

Peter understood the message of his vision: Do not call any man impure or unclean. Paul repeatedly asserted that the gospel—wide as possible in scope—included all people. Gal 3:28-29 teaches:

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Peter spoke, but did not follow, words that were all-inclusive in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:39: “39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” One of the great stories of the Cornelius episode is how Peter could open himself so quickly to accept and preach to the Gentiles. The answer to Peter’s question, “May I ask why you sent for me?” is key to understanding how the Lord calls people.

Acts 10:30-33

30 Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me 31 and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. 32 Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Cornelius’ answer to Peter reiterated what had happened to him and how he had immediately sent for Peter; but he also gave the reason: “to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” This scene plays out exactly what Paul teaches must happen in order for faith to grow. In Rom 10:14, he wrote, “14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” Certainly, Cornelius, and all men, must hear the gospel before they can believe the gospel.

The stage is set for Peter to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Peter Preaches the Gospel

Acts 10:34-38

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – 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."

Peter begins by stating what he has just accepted: God does not show favoritism but accepts all men who fear him and do what is right. Our generation has its own special problems with accepting that the gospel is for all: all races, all heritages, all incomes, all legal statuses, all sexes, and even all those of opposing religions. Yes, all men have the right to hear the gospel of Jesus and obey it, and we have the obligation to take it to them.

Peter follows with a summary of what had transpired as John the Baptist and Jesus preached the good news throughout Judea. The very language—“the baptism that John preached”—separates and makes a difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. This difference will continue to be made throughout Acts. In Acts 18 and 19, Apollos and certain Corinthians knew only the baptism of John. That they were baptized again, this time in the name of Jesus, shows that the baptism of John is not the baptism that saves. Acts 19:4-5 reports:

4 Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Act 10:39-43

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."

Peter preached the same gospel to Cornelius and his cohorts that he preached on the Day of Pentecost. Every occasion of preaching the gospel in Acts teaches this same message. Christ died for our sins: they hanged him on a tree. He was buried. God raised him from the dead. He was seen because God caused him to be seen. God chose the witnesses who saw him, and they were to preach. They preached that Christ will judge all men, the living and the dead. However, *"everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."*

The First Gentile Converts

Acts 10:44-47

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."

The Holy Spirit descended upon these Gentiles in the same way that it had descended on the apostles in Acts 2. [See notes: 3. The Holy Spirit Comes with Power; This Is What Was Spoken: Acts 2:1-21, for a discussion of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.] Peter said plainly that they had received the Holy Spirit just as the apostles had. They spoke in tongues to demonstrate that power of the Spirit.

Peter's response came quickly and unequivocally: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" Peter, thus distinguished between the coming of the Holy Spirit which confirmed the word and will of God and water baptism which saves. Peter wrote later in 1 Peter 3:21:

21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Acts 10:48

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.

By ordering that they be baptized, Peter proves that baptism is not optional but essential to salvation. This conversion of Gentiles opens the whole world to the gospel of Jesus. With little exception, Luke turns his narrative to the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman world and even beyond.

Paul's experience caused him to shed the vestiges of the Old Covenant still lingering and accept that the Gentiles were God's children. In staying with them for a few days, he illustrated the completeness of his changed view. He had realized the fruition of his words in Acts 2: "the promise is to. . . all them that are afar off."

Acts 11 will begin with Peter having to defend himself for eating with the Gentiles when he arrives back in Jerusalem.