

9. Conversion of Cornelius—Acts 10 & 11

This study of the fulfillment of the Great Commission now comes to the conversion of Cornelius—a Roman centurion. With the study, the *all nations* provision of the Great Commission takes a turn to include all the Gentiles. The word itself means *the nations* and comes from the Greek word *ethos*, from which we get our word *ethnic*. After showing that the gospel is to go to Jews of all nations, the poor and crippled, the Samaritans, and ranking officials and men of other races, Luke now turns to the event that heralded the opening of the gospel to absolutely everyone in the world. The events here recorded are truly historical in shaping the world-wide scope of the gospel call.

The Gospel Went to a Soldier Who Was Devout, God-fearing, and Charitable

Acts 10:1-4

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.

Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army, showing that the gospel should go to military people. His place leading the Italian regiment shows him to be an Italian soldier from close to Rome. Can a person (military or law enforcement) charged to kill by the ruler be a Christian? No evidence suggests that either Cornelius or the Philippian jailor in Acts 16 gave up their jobs in order to obey the gospel. Concerning governing authorities, Paul wrote in Rom 13:4-5, "For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." The question of whether a Christian can bear arms becomes a question for the individual, to be settled by the individual in the context and meaning of Rom 14:23: "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." The gospel in this passage went to a practicing military officer of the Gentiles.

That Cornelius was a good moral man did not save him. He was devout, God-fearing, generous to those in need, and prayed regularly. There was nothing morally wrong with Cornelius, yet he had to hear and obey the gospel to be saved. Those who hide behind the cloak of morality and professed goodness should understand that they still must obey the gospel. Even Christ, himself, had to obey God in order to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15). The Great Commission requires that the gospel go to the good moral people of the world and that they believe, repent, and be baptized.

Cornelius' question upon seeing the angel of God was similar to the question of other converts in showing his openness to do the Lord's will. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

Acts 10:4-8: 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."

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 followed up by doing exactly what the angel told him to do.



Peter's Vision Instructs Him that God Has Created Nothing Unclean

Acts 10:9-18: *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.*

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.*

The central lesson taught to Peter is the expression: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This vision shows Peter that the Gentiles are not unclean. The episode marks the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The ceremonial Law of Moses gives way to the Gospel call of the New Testament.

The Visions Are Told with Emphasis on Hearing the Commands of the Lord

Acts 10:19-33: *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.*

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."

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?"*

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."*

When Peter asked why the men had come, he was told so that he (Cornelius) could hear what you have to say. Two miracles have occurred, but salvation depends on what Peter has to say. In verse 3, Cornelius puts what Peter is to say into the form of commandments of the Lord. When Peter told this story in Acts 11:13-14, he said that the message would save them: "He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'"

Peter Preaches the Gospel

Acts 10:34-43: *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.*

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's sermon to Cornelius and his cohorts exactly summarizes the Great Commission and reflects what the Lord wants all men to know. The *all nations* phrase of the Great Commission is here stated: "God accepts men from all nations." The good news of the gospel is peace through Jesus Christ who was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. The Jews who killed Christ rejected the peace of Christ and his power. God raised him up from the dead and caused him to be seen. Christ commanded the apostles to preach. Paul preached that everyone who believes in Christ would receive the forgiveness of sins in his name.

The Holy Spirit Came upon the Gentiles

Acts 10:44-46: *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.*

The manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles was identical to what had happened to the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. In Acts 11:15-17, Peter reiterated his story, telling that this was the baptism of the Holy Spirit: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" It is clear Cornelius and his gentile cohorts received exactly the same measure of the Holy Spirit as the apostles. These are the only two occasions where this measure of the Spirit is given. Two visions occurred and this demonstration of the Spirit, yet Cornelius and his house were not saved.

Cornelius and His House Believed, Repented, and Were Baptized

Acts 10:46-48: *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.*

The demonstration of the Spirit did not save these people. However, it did show that the Gentiles were to receive the gospel. They still had to be baptized. In fact, Peter ordered that they be baptized, showing that baptism is essential to salvation, and not just an option. Peter had preached that everyone who believed on Christ would have the forgiveness of sins. All those present recognized the necessity for repentance. Acts 11:18 said, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Conclusion

The conversion of Cornelius expands the scope of the gospel to the Gentiles, proving that God is no respecter of persons. This conversion illustrates all the elements of the Great Commission: going to all nations, preaching the gospel of the death, burial, resurrection, and being seen, plus believers who repent and are baptized for the forgiveness of sins and who receive the salvation of life eternal.

Study Questions

1. What were the elements that describe Cornelius' moral nature? _____
2. What was the purpose of Cornelius' vision? _____
3. What was the purpose of Peter's vision? _____
4. What was the purpose of the speaking in tongues? _____
5. What did it take for Cornelius and his house to have forgiveness of sins? _____
6. What did Peter order them to do? _____