

Cornelius Receives a Vision

Text: Acts 10:1-8

Introduction:

Peter has been preaching the Gospel throughout Judea. We have followed him to Lydda, where he healed a man who was paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Following this, messengers from the port city of Joppa, sent for Peter, as a beloved disciple, named, Dorcas, had unexpectedly died of a serious illness. We then followed Peter to Joppa, where he prayed, and served as an intercessory vehicle for the raising up of Dorcas. And the disciples there were edified, and many more lost souls were saved.

This morning, we move up north, 31 miles, still hugging the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to the Roman Capital city of Caesarea, where Peter will be called to preach the Gospel to a gentile centurion, and his family. And as we work through this lengthy section of Scripture, carrying us all the way into mid-Chapter 11, we will find this to be a "watershed" moment, in the history of the early church. A ground breaking bridge between Jew and Gentile, will be firmly established in these events. And it all begins, when a God-fearing, Roman centurion, named, Cornelius, receives a vision of an angel of God.

I. Who is Cornelius? (vs. 1-2)

"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment (Cohort), a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms (charitable gifts) generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (vs. 1-2).

There are two important things that I want to consider with you, concerning the general background information, that we are given about this man Cornelius, before we move on to examine the vision that he receives. The first, relates to his ethnic background, and the second relates to his character.

1) Cornelius's ethnic background- Cornelius was a "centurion," that is, a commander over one hundred soldiers belonging to the Roman Empire. Remember, Rome is presently ruling over much of the known world at this time, including Judea and Jerusalem, and the Jews were not too happy about that. Naturally, they desired to be a free nation, overseeing and ruling over their

own affairs. But, they were subject to Rome, by force. And Rome was able to maintain this type of an extended reign, by means of appointed rulers over various locations (the Herods and Pontius Pilates of the world), and occupying soldiers.

Caesarea, where Cornelius was stationed, was a cosmopolitan city, which Herod the Great had built, and which he named after Caesar Augustus. And "it was the provincial capital of Judea under the Roman governors," where a significant military presence existed (Dennis E. Johnson, *Acts*, Pg. 124). And so, Cornelius, who was a part of the Italian Regiment, indeed, a *centurion* in the Italian regiment, would have been a high ranking official, working with and for the very empire that had exercised sovereign rule over the Jews. And of course, Cornelius was a gentile, as well. And so, from an ethnic standpoint, Cornelius would have naturally been looked at, as a part of the problem, from the standpoint of the Jews. He was a heathen, gentile, living in God's land, working as a direct representative of the Roman Empire, who had oppressed the people of God.

2) Cornelius's Character- While Cornelius was a Roman centurion, he was also greatly affected by the God of the Jews. We are told that he feared God, along with his household. Cornelius had great respect for, and reverence toward, the true and living God, so much so, that he led his family in the ways of God. He believed in the One true God, and he sought to honor and keep His commandments. And while he was not circumcised or necessarily committed to the ceremonial/dietary laws, he was an upright man, who, like Dorcas, was very charitable toward the poor (he "gave alms"), and he consistently sought the Lord in prayer. In these senses, Cornelius was very unique and clearly a subject of God's divine grace. [Note Acts 10:22 as well; Also compare to Luke 7:1-10].

Sometimes, the people we might assume to be the furthest from grace, are truly some of the closest, exhibiting a remarkable level of faith. God has His people in every walk and sphere of life. And so, let us be prepared to testify, wherever we go. A wealthy, well respected, Roman centurion, who had great authority, feared the true and living God, more than most of the Jewish religious leaders of the day! And this fear, drove him to walk uprightly before the Lord.

II. Cornelius Receives a Vision (vs. 3-6)

"About the ninth hour of the day (3:00 pm) he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!'" (vs. 3)

Here, we find that Cornelius was living according to "temple time," as it were, because he was praying during the Jewish, "hour of prayer," at 3:00 pm. And it is at this time, as the evening sacrifice was being offered by the Jews, and as the people were praying, that Cornelius received this vision [Note Acts 3:1]. Again, this continues to confirm the reverence, which Cornelius had for the true and living God. While the New Covenant had come in Christ, it had not yet been proclaimed to the whole world. And so, Cornelius is still living in the Old Covenant light, but that is about to change, isn't it? And so, the angel of God, in the vision, comes to Cornelius, and calls him by name. Indeed, God calls out to His people, in a very personal way, because He already knows, those who are His!

"And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, 'What is it, lord?'" (vs. 4a)

The one who had one hundred soldiers beneath him, had no problem, paying due respect to the Lord's angel, putting himself under the authority of God's messenger, calling him, 'lord.'

"So he said to him, 'Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God'" (vs. 4b).

Now brethren, what makes this statement so profound, involves two key factors:

1) From an Old Covenant standpoint, this man was a heathen gentile, who was not circumcised, and who would have been perpetually unclean (not being committed to the ceremonial laws---not a proselyte, but rather, a "God-fearing gentile"), and yet, his prayers and his charitable alms giving, came up as a "memorial before God." They were pleasing to God, in some very real sense.

2) From a New Covenant standpoint, this man was totally ignorant that the Christ/Messiah had already come, in Jesus (which is why Peter will be sent to him).

How is it then, that this man's prayers and alms have come up for a memorial before God? He is not even near the temple for that matter, and yet, God has received his offerings? Does this not contradict the Gospel, from a New Covenant standpoint, and the Mosaic Law from an Old Covenant standpoint? Where is this man presently standing, in God's plan of redemption?

Brethren, I want to suggest to you that this man is presently standing in a sphere of transition, where the New Covenant is operatively replacing the Old Covenant. And because of this, this situation is very unique, and limited to the time, when the foundation of the New Covenant church was being laid. The centurion's fear of God, came out of an Old Covenant

influence, through the Jewish religion. Indeed, he would have known of, and hoped in, and was probably here praying about, the coming Messiah (who, from his standpoint, had not yet come). And though he was continuously ceremonially unclean, because he was on the horizon of the New Covenant, which now appeared in Christ, he exhibited the faith, which alone, would be necessary unto salvation. And now, God is going to secure his faith, by moving it to its proper object and destination in Christ! This man is an "incomplete," about to be brought to "completion." And to that end, his uncircumcision, and his failure to observe the dietary/ceremonial laws would do nothing whatsoever, to hinder him from entering the Kingdom of God, by grace. That is one of the reasons that this whole event (one of the longest, recorded in the Book of Acts) is a watershed event. This is the clear bridge, joining Jew and Gentile together, under one roof, in Christ! And the ceremonial Law has no place under this roof!

And so, ultimately, to view this text, asking the question, "Is this man presently saved or not?" misses the great emphasis of this text. It is not about locating the specific point of salvation, which from God's standpoint, is a certainty attached to the whole irrevocable process. Rather, the emphasis here is gloriously placed on God melding together, in Christ, that which was once, virtually "unmeldable", Jew and Gentile. [III: trying to use "wood glue" to connect steal pipes; either the glue must be changed, or the pipes---Christ turns water into wine, changing the substance, bringing the two together, stripping away the Mosaic Ceremonial/Judicial Laws, which could never bring the two together, and He joins both by His shed blood]. Indeed brethren, what happens here with Cornelius is one critical illustration of the power of the Gospel, to unite all nations together, in Christ. We will see this more clearly, as we press through the remainder of this lengthy section.

"Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do" (vs. 5-6).

Indeed, the centurion, who was seeking God's favor and salvation, would be granted that blessing, in Christ! And rather than revealing Christ through the angel, God would have the centurion send for his servant, the Apostle Peter, who was presently, providentially, staying at Joppa. This would serve not only to bring the centurion, specifically to Jesus, but also as a means of dealing with Peter's heart, as well as the hearts of those back at Jerusalem, bringing them further into conformity with God's will, to unite all nations in Christ, without any necessary attachment to the Mosaic Law. And this is one major reason why Peter was sent for, rather than

say, Philip, who was already conveniently living in Caesarea, and who had already been influential in the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch. This critical bridge needed to be formed, first, at the apostolic level, so that they, in laying the foundation of Christ's church, would set the pattern for all else. And indeed, this was no easy task!

And so, the centurion is commanded to send for Peter, God's servant, who would bring the good news of Christ to these elect gentiles!

III. Cornelius Obeys the Angel's Orders (vs. 7-8)

"And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa" (vs. 7-8).

Following the angel's departure, Cornelius immediately takes action, in obedience to the Lord's command. This matter of the soul is critical to him! And so, he makes it his immediate priority to send for Peter. And he does so, by sending some of his most loyal servants, to find Peter. He wants to ensure that Peter is found, and so, he sends two of his household servants, and a devout soldier (one whom he could trust to faithfully complete this mission; one who has a proven record of diligently and faithfully completing the tasks, given him by his master). He gives them all the details, and sends them off on the journey.

And next time, Lord willing, we will spend time, considering a vision that Peter receives, which will compel him to cooperate with the messengers of Cornelius. A little, very important heart work, will need to be done in Peter, as a prerequisite to his meeting with these men.

AMEN!!!