

Episode #1151 Acts 10 Part 1-Cornelius the Centurion

I. Acts is unique in the New Testament. Rather than the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, it focuses on what came after, when the Lord had ascended back into heaven. The Lord left His disciples with many commands to carry out, and Acts tells us how they did them.

II. Through the first nine chapters of the book of Acts, we have seen the gospel grow in Jerusalem and spread to the lands around, but we have seen that every believer in Jesus as the Christ was a Jew, and not a single Gentile had believed in Christ up to that time. Now, however, in Acts 10, we read of the first Gentile believer in the Lord Jesus, the centurion Cornelius. Now we come to one of the truly magnificent chapters of the Word of God. There is so much to be learned here, and in learning we must keep traditions out and human ideas out and everything that is foreign to the truth.

III. The Vision of Cornelius. Acts 10:1-8.

A. Acts 10:1. Now we are introduced to a man named Cornelius. We are given a list of facts about him. If this man had been filling out an application for employment or maybe for credit, we could say: name: Cornelius (Latin, meaning “Of a Horn”); residence: Caesarea; occupation: soldier; position: centurion (ruler of a hundred) in the Roman army; division: of the Italian Regiment. The Romans were an army of occupation. Cornelius was probably the highest ranked soldier around, so very powerful. Rome was in Italy, so this band was prestigious.

B. Verse 2. More facts about Cornelius.

1. As to his character, we have the reference here of the Holy Spirit. Often when people apply for credit or employment they must give references. We do not go to men for this regarding Cornelius, but to the Holy Spirit, and He calls him devout (pious). That word is full of meaning. It is not an ordinary word. He was a God-fearing man. It was not just a private practice either. He was such a devout and God-fearing man that this caught on with his house, which was probably rather large, and even his servants. This was a man who spread his faith, not just keeping it to himself.
2. There are those who would try to tell us Cornelius was a Jew in the service of Rome. That is simply utterly ridiculous. Any man who would take a job in the Roman army as a centurion, the police force that was in Israel of the occupying army, that man could never be described as a devout man who feared God, for such a man indeed was a traitor to his own people. He was guilty of collaborating with the enemy, of showing sympathy to them and taking work from them. This would be far worse than a Jew becoming a tax gatherer. It is utterly ridiculous to think that Cornelius was a renegade Jew who had taken a position with the Roman army.
3. As to his works: even though he was part of the army of occupation, he gave alms (gifts to the poor) to Israel. Israel’s economy was very poor, they were a conquered people living under Rome, and many were in poverty. Their distress was great. Cornelius saw this and had compassion, as any good, godly man should have done.
4. He prayed to God always. It was customary among those outside of Israel at this time, and even some inside of Israel, to make an offering at every shrine in the hope that they would, shall we say, hit the jackpot. They would pray

one day to one god and the next day to another god and the next day to another one in hopes that they would hit the right one. But Cornelius was not that kind of man. When he prayed, he prayed to God. If he got the answer, well and good. If he did not get the answer, he was not going to turn to some idol or some other shrine. He prayed to the true God.

5. This makes some think he was a proselyte. He didn't have to be a proselyte.
 - a. He is one of those many men we find throughout Scripture who worshiped the true God outside of Israel.
 - b. We think of the man Abimelech in Genesis 20, a very good man, such a good man that God kept him from sinning against him and God spoke to him personally. Was Abimelech a Jewish proselyte? No; there was no such thing then as a Jewish proselyte.
 - c. We could go on from there and speak of many others. We could speak of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, in Exodus 18; we could speak of Hiram king of Tyre in I Kings 5; we could speak of the queen of Sheba in I Kings 10; we could speak of Naaman the Syrian in II Kings 5; and yes, we could speak of the extremely wise men in Matthew 2 who came to see the infant Christ child. These were not Jewish proselytes.
 - d. Nor does it make sense that he was a proselyte, as the Jews would probably not welcome a member of the occupying army into their religion, and his commanders would look down on him identifying like this with the people he was supposed to be policing.
6. What Cornelius was doing any man on earth could have done at that time. It was always required of men that they fear God and work righteousness, and the righteousness required them doing what God revealed to them to do. It could be a matter of conscience, or it could be a matter of further revelation. Any man on earth could have been what Cornelius was. Peter declares it in Acts 10:35. It has always been true and it will always be true that if a man fears God and works righteousness, that is accepted with Him. That does not mean that he can pick out the works he will do and decide he will do this and do that. He has to do that thing he knows is right in the sight of God and refrain from that thing he knows is wrong in the sight of God. If a man does that he will not be rejected. If he does that he will be accepted of God. At this point in the story, Cornelius could easily have died at the hands of some assassin in Israel, for they were always trying to do away with the soldiers of the Roman occupation, and there were constant insurrections against the government of Rome. There were many murders committed in such insurrections, and Cornelius could have died at the hand of such assassins. He was a foreigner in a foreign land, and he was dependent on the security his own band of soldiers could give him. If he had died right there, as a God-fearing man who did what he knew and saw to be right and refrained from what he knew and saw to be wrong, this man would have been raised from the dead to take a place in the kingdom of God when the time comes for such men to be raised from the dead. But God is going to hold out to him a greater opportunity, for this man is going to be given an opportunity to receive the Lord Jesus Christ.

7. Remember, you cannot describe him as one of the sinners of the Gentiles, even though a Gentile he most certainly was. But he is not a sinner of the Gentiles. This is a very peculiar case. People will talk about the gospel going to the Gentiles. Here the gospel did not go to the Gentiles; it went to a devout, God-fearing man who when he prayed, prayed to God and who had led his whole household into this fear of God and turned them to righteousness. That is the kind of man he was. This is not a clear example of the gospel going to sinners among the Gentiles.
- C. Verse 3. The ninth hour = three o'clock in the afternoon. This was a time of prayer in the temple, so perhaps Cornelius had adopted the customs of the Jews by praying at this time (Acts 10:30). He had a vision. Therefore, it was not a reality, like if I saw a vision of my car, as opposed to seeing my car. I could get in and drive if I saw my car, but not if I saw a vision of it. Yet visions can be real, and this one contained a true message from God. He sees an angel of God coming in to him. Greek *aggelos* (angel) means "messenger."
 - D. Verse 4. This was a heavenly, not a human, messenger, so Cornelius was afraid. This was often the reaction of those who saw angels! The word "lord" is *kurie* in Greek, often translated Lord. Here, it is used as a term of respect, meaning "master" or "sir." God's message was encouraging. A memorial is a reminder, and now the prayers he had prayed and the gifts he had given in due time had come up as a reminder before God. He has been reminded of the kind of man Cornelius is by these things that have come up before Him, and thus will act.
 - E. Verse 5. Cornelius receives very explicit instructions. He is to send men, not to go himself. Peter should come, Cornelius shouldn't go. "Send" and "send for" here are both forms of the Greek *pempo*, a simple sending, rather than *apostello*, to send with authority.
 - F. Verse 6. Two Simons makes things a little confusing, but Cornelius had to be an intelligent man to be a leader, and he could keep this straight. His house is by the seaside, which will make it easy to find. A tanner's house would be by the sea so the sea breezes could carry the foul smells of animal carcasses away from the city. Such a smelly dwelling was an odd place to find an agent of God! This Simon Peter will tell him what he must do. Thus his instructions end.
 - G. Verse 7. Cornelius did not waste time carrying out his instructions. He calls three men, no doubt ones he considered trustworthy and suited to the task, as well as being wholehearted in their devotion to the true God as he was.
 - H. Verse 8. Cornelius explained what happened and gives them their orders. "Send" here is *apostello*, to send with authority or to commission. They had authority to speak for Cornelius and invite Peter to his home. These men, then, became Cornelius' apostles.
- IV. The Vision of Peter. Acts 10:9-20.
- A. Acts 10:9. Now the next day, our attention turns to Peter. He didn't know God was sending these men his way. God needs to prepare him for his part in their meeting. In other words, we are going to see the Lord here working at both ends. He has worked in Caesarea and has caused Cornelius to send this devout soldier and those who waited on him, and he has told them all these things and has sent them to Joppa. The Lord is going to start at the other end and work on Peter, and then He will bring all this together. These are the kinds of things God does under His government,

- orchestrating events according to His will. Their houses would become very hot with the sun beating on them during the day, so he probably went on the housetop to enjoy the breeze. The sixth hour (noon) was one of prayer in the temple (9:00AM, 12:00M, 3:00PM). Peter did not now have access to the temple, being away from Jerusalem, yet he still utilizes the noon hour as a time of prayer.
- B. Verse 10. The noon hour is very close to lunch. Peter on the housetop becomes very hungry and wants to eat. God may have had a hand in this. Peter requests food, but while those in the house below start to prepare it, he falls into a trance. The Lord is about to speak to him.
 - C. Verse 11. "Heaven" is singular here, and probably means the sky. We would get the wrong idea if we think of just a bed sheet. The idea is of a great sail, as they would have on a ship in the Mediterranean: square, and made of a single large piece of cloth. The sail is bound or tied up at the four corners. You can easily imagine this. You could do this with a handkerchief, tying it up by the four corners. A cloth bound up this way makes a very good "bag."
 - D. Verse 12. There were many varieties of creatures inside, but all unclean according to the law of Moses.
 - E. Verse 13. A voice encourages Peter to satisfy his hunger by killing and eating these unclean animals. A lot of people read into this that the Lord is about to eliminate all the dietary laws He gave to Israel. That is not true. We have to learn what the interpretation of this is, and it is not that the dietary laws are over with.
- V. Conclusion: The man Cornelius is an important character in the Biblical record, being the first Gentile who was not a proselyte to receive the gospel message. This whole event was orchestrated in detail by God, Who communicated both with Cornelius and with Peter prior to the two meeting. When God's kingdom is in the earth, He works this way, working all together according to His will. Yet this is not about the end of Israel's laws of clean and unclean foods, but about what God was doing with a man the Jews would have considered unclean. We will learn more about this pivotal story in our next message.