

Episode #1201 Acts 10 Part 3-Fearing God and Working Righteousness

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. We read of the first Gentile believer in the Lord Jesus, the centurion Cornelius, in Acts 10. We saw last time Peter arrived at the household of Cornelius. Cornelius offered Peter worship, but he refused to receive it, something the Lord Jesus Christ never refused to do. This shows us that Christ was far greater than Peter was: He is actually God. Now we will see what else happens to Peter and what else he says in the household of Cornelius.

III. Peter Meets Cornelius. Acts 10:21-33.

- A. Verse 27. He goes into Cornelius' house. You know means you are familiar. This was forbidden by Jewish custom, but Peter was obeying the Spirit's command. He finds those Cornelius had gathered to hear the word.
- B. Verse 28. This crowd would have well known that Jews would not enter their houses, so first Peter explains to them why he has ignored this custom. We would all do well to go against our own cultures when God shows us something different! Notice that Peter calls Cornelius a man of another nation. This should settle once and for all that he was neither a Jew nor a proselyte. Greek for "unlawful" = *athemitos*, and means contrary to custom or statute. This was not contrary to God's law. Notice: this was the point of Peter's vision. It was not telling him anything about food. It had nothing to do with animals or with Hebrew dietary laws. It was not until Paul wrote I Timothy 4:4-5 that we learn that all meats are clean for us.
- C. Verse 29. Notice that Peter honestly does not know why Cornelius sent for him. Peter was operating under a different dispensation than we do today. The gospel was not freely available to all nations, as it is today (Acts 28:28). Instead, the word was sent to the people of Israel (Acts 2:39, 13:26). The apostles were to go out and proclaim the truth to Israelites around the world. Once Israel was brought into the kingdom, then they would take the truth to the nations, bringing them into the kingdom as well. That was the plan, but now God is interrupting the program with something new. Peter was not expecting to preach the word to any Gentile!
- D. Verse 30. Cornelius starts to repeat his part of the story. Peter must have been meeting with him around 3:00PM again. We learn that Cornelius was fasting and praying when he had his vision. Fasting was a sign of seeking God. It is a rule of the kingdom that "he who seeks finds" (Matthew 7:8, Luke 11:10). Otis Sellers translates "bright clothing" as "splendid attire." Most of our paintings show angels in simple white garments. Not this one!
- E. Verse 31. Cornelius repeats what the angel says from memory, and does not get it exactly right, though he gets the major points right. Which of us could repeat something someone said the day before word-for-word and get it right? But God remembers exactly both what the angel said and how Cornelius repeated it, and He accurately repeats both. A forger would have copied what he wrote the first time!
- F. Verse 32. Cornelius was a soldier, used to obeying orders. He repeats what he was to do exactly, though not in the exact same words the angel used.
- G. Verse 33. Cornelius acknowledges that Peter had to break custom to come, but he commends him for it, knowing he was obeying God. He assures Peter that all these

here with him are ready to hear the command of God. “Present” = *pareimi*, “present,” not the more technical *parousia*, an official presence. Thus the stage is set, and we are ready for that very brief but highly-instructive, Divinely-inspired message that Peter will give in the household of Cornelius.

IV. Peter Preaches the Gospel to Cornelius. Acts 10:34-43.

- A. As an introduction to this, I would like to remind you of certain statements I made in messages under the subject of “The Flow of Truth.” In the 23 propositions I set forth in those messages, I declared that in the eight years that elapsed between the day of Pentecost and Peter’s visit to the house of Cornelius (Acts 2 to Acts 10), every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ (no exceptions, no distinctions) was a Jew, a member of Israel. No man was authorized to speak the salvation-bringing message to anyone else, and even if a Gentile overheard it as it was being proclaimed to Israelites, it was still not for him. The Ethiopian eunuch was no exception to this. He was a convert to the Jewish religion, and has to be considered as being a Jew, as we have already seen in Acts 8. This thrice-repeated vision Peter saw on the housetop was a special commission, an authorization and a direction for him to go to the house of Cornelius. It was a specific authorization for him to go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. However, it must be noted that it was man who was commissioned, a man who was authorized, and not the message. The proclamation of Jesus Christ to the household of one Roman centurion represents Peter’s entire ministry to the Gentiles, and that represents the ministry of everyone else to the Gentiles until the time Paul began his ministry to Gentiles in Acts 13. Peter had no commission to go to any other Gentile. He was not God’s commissioned one, God’s apostle, to the Gentiles. He was God’s commissioned one to one prominent, Gentile household. This served to prepare the believers in Israel for the ministry of Paul among the Gentiles which started six years later. Now Cornelius did not become a herald of the salvation-bringing message to other Gentiles, as many would like us to think. He may have wished to do so, but he could not do this without a Divine commission in the Acts period, and if Cornelius was given a commission to proclaim the gospel to other Gentiles, then we should call him God’s apostle to the Gentiles, but Cornelius was not, and Peter was not. Paul was the only man whom God commissioned and authorized to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles as far as the 33 years of which the book of Acts is the history is concerned. I wanted you to have those facts before you as we consider Peter’s message.
- B. Verse 34. “In reality, I see that God is no respecter of persons.” He is going to show what he means by that. These are the words Peter said when he began to speak. Naturally you wonder how long it would take him to say this. If you were to read it through, you could probably read it in two minutes, slowly and carefully, from the first to the last. It is a very short message, very brief and right to the point. A slow reader might take a little longer if you were going to read it carefully and meditate on every word, but generally two minutes would be sufficient. These were not Peter’s words, but as God’s inspired apostle, he was speaking the very words of God. God had sent him on this mission, and would not fail to give him the words to speak. First he summarizes what he himself has just learned. God does not favor people, as we do, based on the things of this world such as nationality.
- C. Verse 35. “Nation” is the Greek *ethnos*, the word incorrectly translated “Gentile” in so many passages. Here it is clear it means nations. They had to translate it right here.

There are many words that have been habitually translated wrong, and yet there are places where they were simply forced to translate them correctly. This is one of those places with this word nation. It is not right to translate it Gentile ever. This is a truth which many deny, but would do well to consider. I believe that this was a Divine principle that began with Adam, and that continues through right to the present time: that in every nation, every land, every place, any person who reverences God, who stands in respect and awe of God and works righteousness; that is, does what he knows to be right and refrains from what he knows to be wrong; will be accepted by Him. Someone might say, "But how much righteousness would they know?" That is not for me to answer or to say what conscience has told anyone. But I am only required by this verse to know that all through human history (it was true in the past and it is true in the present) that every person who fears God and works righteousness is accepted by Him. Now when Jesus Christ is presented to anyone and the facts concerning God in Christ are presented, then it becomes that person's work of righteousness to believe on Jesus Christ, and failure to believe in such circumstances would be a very serious sin, and could even mean the loss of a person's soul. But up until that time it is a person's duty to do what he knows to be right and to refrain from what he knows to be wrong. That is what Peter declares here, and this is seen throughout the Old Testament. In every nation whoever fears God and works righteousness is accepted by Him, even if he is part of a tribe deep in a jungle somewhere, or living in a country where the name of Jesus Christ is never spoken. If He fears the One he knows to be God, if he refrains from what he knows to be wrong and does that which he knows to be right, then, according to this verse, this man will be accepted with God. Some will protest that this means that there will be salvation for some apart from Jesus Christ. No man will receive salvation unless he has a Savior, and the only available Savior is the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet if we ask for what reason Christ may identify Himself with a man, we can discover here that God's standard is clear. The Lord looks at the heart of men, whatever nation they may be a part of, even if they are not privileged to be part of a "Christian nation." Yet this is not an alternative way to salvation for any who might have heard the message of Christ and yet not cared to believe it. John 6:29. For the one who knows the truth about Jesus Christ, there is only one work of righteousness which can any longer be considered as sufficient in the eyes of God, and that is to believe in Him. You cannot say you fear God and work righteousness if you fail to do this! For example, Cornelius feared God and did what he knew to be right. Once Peter spoke to him of Jesus Christ, however, he would have lost everything he had before if he failed to believe. Upon believing, however, he received greater privileges than he ever could have hoped for before. This is the lesson Peter learned. Will we learn it too?

V. Conclusion: Peter knew his instructions, and he knew that he was sent to proclaim the message to Jews, not to Gentiles. Yet God was doing a new work here, a work that would pave the way for Paul's later ministry to Gentiles. Yet we must not be guilty of taking Peter's single commission here and spreading it out. Peter was sent to the household of one Gentile man, Cornelius. He was not sent to all Gentiles everywhere. Peter's simple message to the household of Cornelius reveals a great truth we should not forget: that the Divine expectation of people everywhere is that they fear the God they know to exist, that they perform what they know to be right, and that they refrain from what they know to be wrong. All too few there are who do this!

Yet when one further hears the message of Jesus Christ, the great act of righteousness of believing in Him becomes the pivotal issue. Cornelius could gain much by believing, but he could also lose all he had before by rejecting. Those who hear my voice have all heard the message of Jesus Christ. Have you performed the act of righteousness God demands of you by believing in Him? No other act will do!