

### The Visions of Cornelius and Peter

#### Acts 10:1-23

Acts 10:1-23: *"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment,<sup>2</sup> a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.<sup>3</sup> About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"<sup>4</sup> And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.<sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.<sup>6</sup> He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

<sup>9</sup> *The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour.<sup>10</sup> Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance<sup>11</sup> and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth.<sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.<sup>13</sup> And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."<sup>14</sup> But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."<sup>15</sup> And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."<sup>16</sup> This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.<sup>17</sup> Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.<sup>18</sup> And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.<sup>19</sup> While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you.<sup>20</sup> Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."<sup>21</sup> Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?"<sup>22</sup> And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you."<sup>23</sup> Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him."*

#### Background Notes

Cornelius was a centurion, a Roman army officer who was in command of 100 soldiers. He was attached to the Italian regiment (v1). Cornelius was a "semi-proselyte" of Judaism. He believed in the one true God of Israel, and he accepted most Jewish beliefs and practices. He was not a full proselyte because he probably had not been circumcised.

Was Cornelius “saved” before Peter came to his home? Was he like one of the Old Testament saints, such as Abraham, who believed in the one true God and his faith was reckoned unto him as righteousness? *“Abraham believed God and it was accounted unto him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6)*. Some verses in Acts 10 indicate that Cornelius may have been saved before he met Peter – for example, *“a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (v2)*. And verse 4, where the angel said to him, *“Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.”* Could that be said of an unsaved person? And when Peter said - *“In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (v34-35)* - he was certainly referring to Cornelius. All this was said *before* the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius.

On the other hand, when Peter reported this event to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem he said, *“And he [Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.’” (Acts 11:13-14)*. From these verses, it sounds like Cornelius was not saved until Peter brought the gospel to Cornelius.

So what’s the answer? Was Cornelius saved before Peter’s visit or after Peter’s visit? This may be the best way to answer that question: Romans 1 indicates that, in some way or other, God makes Himself known to every person who has ever lived. Most people reject the knowledge or the “light” that God has given them, and some even suppress the truth they have been given. Those people who reject and suppress the truth are without excuse.

Cornelius, unlike the vast majority of people, was living his life according to the amount of knowledge or “light” that God had given him. Therefore God made Himself responsible for getting more light to Cornelius. And God will do the same thing today.

## **Doctrinal Points**

### **1. The vision given to Peter reveals God’s concept of the Church.**

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, *“I will build my church.”* Peter was there when the Lord spoke these words, and Peter had seen the beginning of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, when 3000 Jewish converts were baptized. But the great truth of the Church as the body of Christ, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, was yet to be revealed. This truth was revealed to the apostle Paul (in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians).

However, here in the vision given to Peter, God was beginning to reveal that the Church would be composed of Jews and Gentiles - on an equal basis! God had certainly prepared Peter for this truth when the Samaritans were brought into the

Church (Acts 8). But at least the Samaritans were part Jewish, and they held to many of the Old Testament traditions. Could it be that God was going to bring uncircumcised pagan converts in the Church?

When Peter was told to eat animals that were both “clean” and “unclean” under the Old Testament Law, he said, “*Not so, Lord!*” (By the way – “Not so, Lord” is never a good response when the Lord tells us to do something!) Peter had to be told *three times* that uncircumcised Gentiles were no longer to be considered unclean, but would be on an equal footing with the Jews when they all were brought together in the Christian Church.

In Peter’s vision, the large sheet coming down from Heaven represented the Church. In Galatians 3:28, Paul wrote that “*in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek*” - that is, Jews and Gentiles are equal in Christ. This great truth was revealed to Peter in Acts 10. The vision given to Peter revealed God’s concept of the Church.

## **2. The vision given to Cornelius reveals God’s concern for “the lost.”**

When we say that Jesus is the only way to God, we often hear the question, “But what about people who have never heard the gospel? If God is just and fair, how does He deal with these people?” I think Acts 10 helps us answer that question.

The way God dealt with Cornelius shows us that ***God is concerned about lost people***. Remember, Cornelius came from a pagan Roman culture - a culture that had many false “gods” and did not acknowledge the one true God. But Cornelius was a sincere seeker of the one true God, and Cornelius was living up to the “light,” or the knowledge of God, that he had received. When Cornelius came into contact with the God of Israel and the Old Testament Scriptures, he responded to this increased light by ***believing and obeying*** the Old Testament Scriptures, and becoming a proselyte of Judaism.

When Cornelius responded to the “light” of God in the Old Testament Scriptures, what was the result? God made sure that Cornelius received more light! God sent a vision to Cornelius and a vision to Peter. God directed both of them what to do, and they both obeyed. Thus Cornelius heard the gospel and believed.

Does God operate that same way today? Yes, I think He does. Listen to what the apostle Paul said to the people of Athens: “*And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:26-28).

The people of Athens were not Jewish people who had the Old Testament Scriptures – they were Gentiles who believed in many Greek “gods.” But this Scripture indicates that anyone who is really seeking the one true God will find Him. In some way, God will give more light to people who are responding to the knowledge of Him that they already have. It may be through a missionary or through some other means, but God will get more light to that person.

Last week I was speaking to a college student who had been an atheist until he recently had a “near death experience.” Now he was convinced that there was a God, and he was seeking to learn more and know more about Him. He “just happened” to see me with a Bible and started asking questions, and I was able to give him some answers. Now he’s interested in studying the Bible.

Do you think this was all by chance? Of course not! God is concerned about lost people, and He is working behind the scenes to bring this young man to Himself. The vision of Cornelius reveals God’s concern for lost people.

## Practical Application

### Let’s be glad that Peter was not like Jonah

Remember the story of Jonah, the Old Testament prophet? The Lord asked Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach God’s message of grace to the Gentiles. It was from **Joppa** that Jonah sailed away to Tarshish, in deliberate disobedience of the Lord’s command.

It was in **Joppa** that Peter received the call to take the message of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and the Gentiles. But unlike Jonah, Peter obeyed the Lord - and the gospel went out to the Gentile world. Aren’t you glad? All of us in this congregation today can probably trace our salvation to Acts 10!

Notice that Peter was staying in the home of a man named Simon, who was a tanner. *“So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner” (Acts 9:43).* And verse 6 of chapter 10, *“He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do” (10:6).* What is a “tanner”? A tanner’s job was to clean and cure the hides of animals – probably including unclean animals.

So God was already preparing Peter with the vision and the call ahead of time. When that request from Cornelius came, Peter did not “sail away to Tarshish”! No, Peter obeyed the call of God to preach to the Gentiles.

What a contrast! We should be very glad that Peter was not a Jonah!