

Text: Acts 10:1-8

Title: Cornelius!

Exegetical Truth: God did a special work in the life of Cornelius.

Homiletical Truth: God has done a similar work in the life of every Christian.

Date/Location: Wednesday 1/16/2013 and 1/3/2024 at FBC

Introduction

The gospel has not yet gone to Gentiles *en masse*. Luke now records how it does so. First, however, we see that God did a special work in the life of Cornelius. He made him into a godly man, and then sent an angelic messenger to direct Cornelius to the right person to minister the saving news about Jesus. God did His work, and in that work, He required Cornelius to do something too.

I. The Man Cornelius, v. 1-2

A. A **Gentile**.

B. A **centurion** - military man, of the Italian Regiment (cohort, battalion).

In the Roman military set-up there was first of all the **legion**. It was a force of **six thousand** men and therefore was roughly equal to a division. In every legion there were **ten cohorts**. A cohort therefore had **six hundred men** and comes near to being the equivalent of a battalion. The cohort was divided into **centuries** and over each century there was a **centurion**. The century is therefore roughly the equivalent of a **company**." [William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The

Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), page 79.]

So, Cornelius commanded about 100 men. See **Matthew 8:5-13**.

- C. **A devout man** – very reverent, pious, godly. Oh for more such men!!!
- D. **A God-fearing man**. Personally, he had a profound level of respect for God.
- E. **A man with a God-fearing household**. The “with” indicates that his family and household servants joined him in his respect for God. The household was taught that fear of God by their leader – Cornelius – and his behavior reinforced it.
- F. **A generous man who gave alms**. He was charitable and very generously so. I do not believe that this should be limited to the Jewish people, although they cannot be excluded from his generosity. Alms were gifts to the poor, acts of mercy.
- G. **A man of prayer**. He prayed to God always. How about that—1 Thess 5:17 in practice!
- H. These are characteristics of believers in all ages. Review them and see if you are doing that kind of stuff in your own life. This guy was a first century soldier—no Bible, no church, no gospel as we have today, and he was not even a Christian yet. We clearly have no excuse!
- I. **Theology**: The era that Acts is recording is a transitional era between the old covenant and the new. Cornelius evidently knew some of the old covenant and followed what he could. His disposition toward God was divinely

given, not self-generated. But the righteousness did belong to Cornelius once God gave it to him. He was a good man!

J. As we read on, we will see that his righteousness was incomplete. God required something more of him. It was not sufficient to be somewhat influenced by the principles of godliness, or to have devout religious practices. Do not get me wrong, I would rather have a world full of people like that if I had a choice between that or a world full of pagan idolaters. But having this form of godliness, as good as it is, lacks true power to transform the inner character and the forgiving and justifying power of the cross of Christ. The good influence of Christianity in the world is not just because of good moral teachings, but because of people truly transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

II. The Vision Cornelius Saw, v. 3-6

A. An angel of God appeared to the centurion around 3pm. It may have taken a second for Cornelius to get his eyes focused properly, but he saw the angel clearly. It was not “evidently about the ninth hour” (KJV) but rather it was evident/clear/open/plain/distinct what he was looking at. The adverb modifies how Cornelius saw. This was a vision, not a dream in sleep. A vision is something seen. I believe the angel really did appear and Cornelius’ eyes were really seeing it.

B. **Theology:** note please that when God sends an angel, this means something BIG is happening. Something very unusual is about to occur. See Luke 1 with Zacharias and Mary, for instance. In this case, it portended a major shift in God’s program from Jew to Gentile.

- C. Cornelius was afraid - any person would be, even an experienced soldier. He asked what it was about, addressing the angel as “lord.” This is not a title of deity, but one of formality, like “sir.”
- D. The angel rehearsed a fact: Cornelius’s prayers and alms (deeds of charity) came up as a memorial before God. God was pleased with those things. A “memorial” refers to those acts as offerings to God that God “remembered.” When God “remembers” this way, it is not the opposite of forgetting, but it means that God took notice and did something about those offerings of worship.
- E. **Theology:** Does God hear the prayers of unbelievers? We err by simplistically answering that He does not *ever* hear their prayers, on the basis of Psalm 66:18 and 1 Peter 3:12. Those are generally true statements. But the unbeliever’s prayer of repentant faith He does hear and responds to. In Jonah 3:8, the Ninevites responded by calling upon God to change His plan to destroy them; God heard that prayer, but it is not at all certain that the whole city became believers or card-carrying church members (so to speak, since there was no church until Acts 2).
1. I do not think that is great question to ask from this text, because it does not appear that Cornelius was an unbeliever in the pagan sense. He was devout, God-fearing, etc. He was an “Old Testament” believer, not up to speed yet on the New Testament revelation concerning salvation. For example: Acts 18:25-26, 19:1-7.

2. But there was something missing in Cornelius's life, evidently, for the angel went on to say that he had to get Peter and hear what Peter had to say. Peter would tell him “what you must do.”
- F. The angel described Peter's current location as Joppa, Simon Peter, with another Simon, a tanner, by the sea. That information would speed the search considerably by narrowing down the exact person and location.
- G. **Theology:** Does God send a messenger to every “seeker”? A problem with the premise of this question is that we define seekers differently than the Bible does. This seeker was a devout, OT-saved kind of individual. The seeker of truth, so called, today, is maybe a pagan who has his own idols and seeks truth his own version of truth and has absolutely no connection to the true and living God. See Romans 3:11.
- H. **Theology:** Why didn't the angel tell the message directly? God has decided to use human means to propagate the gospel message (see the Great Commission), and we could say He has disciplined Himself to stick to that method. This method seems to be in keeping with God's shunning of sensationalism. It also highlights God's glory which is seen in how He uses frail vessels to carry a precious message that brings salvation to others (2 Cor. 4:7). Also, the human messenger is the only one who can bring a message that he has personally experienced. Angels cannot do that.
- I. Occasionally I get this question: “What happens to someone who is God-fearing but has not heard the gospel? What does God do with that person?” Here is the answer: if the person is *truly* God-fearing, that disposition

was gifted to them by God. He will ensure they encounter the good news of Jesus. In this case, God chose to send an angel to kickstart the process. Today, that will not be the case (although I do not completely foreclose on the possibility of God doing that in some kind of extreme situation). Normally, God works through regular means. For example, if we had a modern Cornelius, someone could run into him and mention the good news, or he could look up information online, or buy a Bible in the bookstore, or decide to attend a church in the area. These “run of the mill means” are no less special—God can weave everything in the world together so that His message gets to every destination that it needs to be. The whole network of such interactions is extremely complicated, but God can easily manage all of it.

III. The Obedience of Cornelius, v. 7-8

- A. Cornelius selected three reliable men to go and fetch Peter.
- B. The fact that he had three close personal attendants means this man was a man of great stature in the community. He had two household servants or slaves, and a soldier. I cannot be sure that this business of traveling for religious reasons was covered in the soldier’s contract, but I don’t believe such things were as concerning to them as they are to us.
- C. The soldier was a devout man, which describes him using the same word that described Cornelius himself in v. 1. In other words, Cornelius had a man or men under his command who were of godly character like him. Even in the Roman army there were OT-style believers! (I

imagine that they might really appreciate being assigned to serve in an area near Israel, as they had an affinity for the Hebrew God.)

- D. Cornelius relayed to his men what the angel had revealed/directed him to do.
- E. The journey from Caesarea to Joppa was about 35 miles. It would take the men from Cornelius at least one full day of travel to make it to Joppa, and then they would have to find Peter. Actually, it probably took nearer to two days, as we see from 10:23-24 regarding the return journey.
- F. Notice that Cornelius, like the apostle Paul in 26:19, was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He immediately obeyed what the angel told him to do. Likewise, we must be immediately obedient to what God tells us to do in His word, which is **equivalent** to an angel coming to us and telling us what to do (ponder that for a minute) or if a **prophet** of God came and told us what to do.

Conclusion

Cornelius is a great example. He was godly, he obeyed God, and he did so against the grain of a pagan society and job (military). He was *serious* about God, not messing around, “playing religion.”

Today there is no need for an angel. The good news is spread abroad far enough that if someone is interested, they can call a church, send an email, visit on a Sunday, visit a website, or even write a letter and send it via the postal service!

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