



Sunday School Lesson for October 23, 2005
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"Cornelius and Peter"

Printed Text: Acts 10:1-20

Background Scripture: Acts 10:1-48

Devotional Reading: Acts 13:44-49

Time: A.D. 32-33

Place: Caesarea; Joppa

Acts 10:1-20

1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band,

2 A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.

3 He saw in a vision evidently, about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius.

4 And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.

5 And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter:

6 He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.

7 And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually;

8 And when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa.

9 On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:

10 And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance,

11 And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:

12 Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

13 And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.

14 But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.

15 And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

16 This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.

17 Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate,

18 And called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there.

19 While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee.

20 Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to examine the account of the visions of Cornelius and Peter that would bring them together.

Principle: to teach that God prepares those who give and receive the message of salvation.

Application: to give students a deeper appreciation for God's ability to work in people to accomplish His purposes.

Introduction

Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr. (1920-1978) was the first African-American to attain the rank of four-star general in the U.S. armed forces. There were many bumps along the way. At a speech given in Philadelphia in 1976, General James recalled a certain

incident of racism in his life. After being promoted to full colonel, he was wearing his military uniform with pride as he walked down a sidewalk in his hometown one day. Suddenly, two men confronted him and ripped the rank insignia from his shoulders. The men heaped verbal abuse on James, saying insulting and racist things. They told him that no person of his race could possibly be a colonel in the U.S. Air Force.

But America had looked past skin color in promoting James ever higher in rank. The fact is, James had done a superb job in position after position. He deserved his promotions on merit.

Many in our world still struggle to look past racial, ethnic, and cultural dividing lines. But God has no such difficulty. His impartiality is not based on our merit but is based on the fact that all humans are created in His image. Today's lesson shows how God sent the apostle Peter to offer salvation across the dividing line between Jew and Gentile--an unbridgeable chasm to the thinking of many in the first century. The courage of Peter's actions in preaching to Cornelius should guide us to consider our own behavior toward people of other cultural or racial backgrounds.

Lesson Background

Jesus commissioned the apostles to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The first seven chapters of Acts describe the way that witness was presented in Jerusalem from events on the Day of Pentecost (chapter 2), to the healing of the man who was lame (chapter 3), to the ministries of Stephen (6:8-8:1) and Philip (8:4-40).

After the martyrdom of Stephen, the believers were scattered from Jerusalem, preaching the gospel wherever they went. Conversions of people to Christ are presented from both the Jerusalem period before the death of Stephen and the period afterward in which the witnesses go to all Judea and Samaria. The succession of converts includes people such as the Samaritans (8:4-25), the Ethiopian (8:26-40), and Saul of Tarsus (9:1-31). Human logic tells us that at least some of those included would be unlikely believers in Christ. But Acts 10 presents a convert much more unexpected.

Jews and Gentiles in the Roman world looked at each other with much suspicion. Gentiles found Jewish beliefs and customs to be confusing and narrow-minded, while Jews thought of Gentiles as pagan and immoral. Some Gentiles, however, became convinced that the God of the Jews was good and true. In some cases, these Gentiles converted to Judaism, becoming what was known as *proselytes*. The book of Acts mentions that the worshipers on the Day of Pentecost included such proselytes (2:10).

In other cases, Gentiles did not convert fully to Judaism, but engaged in worship with Jews and lived by many of the requirements of the Law of Moses. These worshipers were referred to as *God-fearers* and are also mentioned in Acts. When Paul stood to speak in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, he directed his words to the "Men of Israel, and ye that fear God" (13:16); by the latter he meant godly Gentiles. When the missionary speakers began proclaiming the gospel of Christ, such synagogue worshipers were ripe for conversion to Christ.

One other factor that is essential for understanding the account about Cornelius is the political situation in Palestine. Rome ruled the Mediterranean area, but they did not consider Jerusalem to be the capital city of Judea. Instead, Caesarea Maritima (or "Caesarea by the sea") was where Roman rule was established, some sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem. (Note: This Caesarea is different from Caesarea Philippi, so don't get the two confused.)

Devout Soldier (Acts 10:1-8)

1. What was significant about the city of Caesarea?

It is important to understand the political situation in Palestine. Rome ruled the Mediterranean area at that time. The Jews considered Jerusalem the capital of Judea; however, Rome established its rule in Caesarea Maritima (or "Caesarea by the sea"), which was sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem. In this text, Caesarea is the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion.

2. What is a centurion?

A centurion was in charge of a century, which is unit of one hundred men. This was the smallest division in the Roman army. Ten centuries made up a cohort, or band, and sixty centuries formed a legion. As the backbone of the Roman army, centurions were responsible for disciplining their troops and leading them into battle. This particular band was made up of Italians. It is interesting to note that Luke puts centurions in a positive light (Luke 7:1-10; 23:47; Acts 27:1-3, 43).

3. What do we know about Cornelius' character? (v. 2)

The scripture describes Cornelius as a devout man who not only feared God, but also made his entire household fear Him as well. It was a family affair for Cornelius. He is a generous person, and he consistently prayed to God.

Cornelius was a Gentile. A Gentile who "feared God" did not simply mean that he or she stood in awe of God. Rather it is a term used to describe Gentiles who embraced certain aspects of Judaism without completely converting to the faith.

As mentioned in the Scripture, he gave generously to the poor, as commanded in the Law and Prophets (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:17-18; Isa. 1:17; Jer 22:3). Although Cornelius also regularly prayed to God, this does not imply that he was a Christian. In fact, he was **not a Christian**. It would be more appropriate to view Cornelius as a seeker as opposed to as a sinner.

Many people have attended church for their entire lifetime. Some of them pray to God on a regular basis. Many give to the less fortunate. Some even encourage others to go to church with them. Yet, those individuals have **never truly** accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior in their hearts. We must not assume that a person is saved based on "church membership," although that is important.

4. How had the prayers of Cornelius been answered? (v.3)

Since Cornelius saw the vision about the ninth hour, we can assume that he was practicing the ritual of prayer at the times designated by Jewish culture (Ps. 55:17). Although the Bible does not make these distinctions between visions and dreams, visions most likely occurred in the day, and dreams occur at night. Cornelius' vision dealt with the purpose of granting Cornelius direction in the present.

Not only did he hear a voice, but he also saw an angel of God approaching him. Cornelius was afraid like many others who were visited by angels (Judg. 6:22-23; Matt. 28:2-4; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10). He addressed the angel as his superior (Acts 10:4). His prayers demonstrated a desire to search for and walk in the light that he had already received.

5. Why did the angel not tell Cornelius what to do to be saved? What does that tell us about how the Gospel is spread?

Now this is an interesting point of discussion. Of course, the angel could've told Cornelius how to be saved, but he didn't. God could've told Cornelius the path to salvation, but He chose not to do so. Before Jesus went to heaven after the resurrection, He gave his followers the Great Commission (Mark 16:15). God decreed that mankind will spread the Gospel to the world. Therefore, the angel sent Cornelius to someone who could share the Good News. In this case, it was Simon Peter.

Would someone be more receptive to salvation if an angel revealed it to that person? I personally don't believe so. Part of the salvation message revolves around the fact that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Angels can decree that, but they can't relate to it. Angels don't have the need for salvation; humans have that need. Now if another human shares the Gospel message, then that person will be more receptive because they will share something in common. As Christians, we can describe to non-Christians the need for salvation and the change that Christ has made in our lives.

Dedicated Servant (Acts 10:9-18)

6. What happened to Peter as he prayed at noon? (v. 9-10)

It is customary for many of us to eat at noon (lunchtime). While waiting for the meal to be prepared, he went to the rooftop and started praying. The roofs in those days were flat, and allowed Peter to pray quietly with cool breezes from the sea. As he was praying and waiting for the preparation of the meal to be completed, he fell into a trance. As Cornelius received a vision from the Lord, so now did Peter.

7. Why was Peter unwillingly to obey the Lord's command to kill and eat? (v. 14)

As a devout Jew, Peter was aware of the Mosaic Law, which provided a list of animals that were clean and unclean. In the vision, Peter saw (unclean) animals which a Jew was forbidden to eat. If those animals were eaten, it would make the person

ceremonially unclean. It was those animals in which the Lord gave Peter the command to kill and eat. As a good Jew, he protested because he did not want to be defiled by those animals. However, God told Peter that anything that He cleaned is clean and not to be considered unclean. Peter would understand the meaning of this vision in a few days.

8. What is the lesson Peter learned from the vision? What does that tell us about witnessing to others? (v. 15)

The lesson is a simple one for Peter. He learns that salvation is for all people, not just for the Jews. Peter has had problems with dealing with Gentiles in the past. He wanted them to become Jewish in order to accept Christ, which is simply not the case. In his actions with Cornelius, he will demonstrate this principle.

It is often easy to spread the gospel to those whom we share something in common with. Whether it is race, gender, etc., we are more comfortable talking to people that we feel are similar to us. As Peter learned, salvation is for everyone. We must be willing to share the Good News to everyone. This includes people we might consider to be unworthy in our eyes. God created everyone in his own image, and no one is considered unworthy to receive salvation.

Directing Spirit (Acts 10:17-20)

9. While Peter was reflecting on the vision, what was happening at the door below? (v. 17-18)

The arrival of the men from Cornelius and the conclusion of this heavenly vision coincided. Of course, this was more than just a mere coincidence. This occurrence was divinely designed. Likewise, we should be very careful to conclude that any event is coincidental. As God's children, we should expect and recognize and expect God's providence, especially when it relates to sharing the Gospel to lost souls.

Having detailed information on how to locate Peter (v. 6), the men from Cornelius arrived at the precise moment that Peter was reflecting on these events. This would further impress upon Peter the gravity of the vision he had just received.

10. Upon going to Cornelius' house in Caesarea, what did he find?

Reassured that the men had been sent by the Lord, Peter was told to accompany them, "doubting nothing" (v. 20). After the men told Peter the events that had brought them to Joppa (v. 21-23). Peter and six Jewish brethren (11:12) made their way to the home of the Roman centurion the next day.

Upon arriving at Caesarea, Peter found a waiting audience, for Cornelius had brought together his family and friends to hear the Word of God (10:24). Cornelius told Peter the events that led him to send for Peter in the first place. A more attentive and willing audience would have been hard to find, for Cornelius concluded, "Now therefore are we all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." (v. 33).

Peter began his Gospel message by affirming that "God is no respecter of persons" (v. 34). Peter continued with the Gospel message outlining the ministry of Christ and the significance of his death and resurrection (v. 35-43). Before the apostle could say any more, though, God interrupted the sermon and sent the Holy Spirit upon the household of Cornelius (v. 44-48). This divine intervention would be important later when Peter is criticized for fraternizing with Gentiles (11:1-8).

Had Peter taken it upon himself to preach to Gentiles and admit them to the church, his actions could have been seen as a mere human decision. However, God plainly demonstrated that Gentiles were accepted into His family, and there was no option but to accept what God had decreed. The presence of six Jewish believers served to corroborate Peter's account when he had to defend his actions in Jerusalem.

As Christians, we should be careful to live the Christian lifestyle. We always have an audience watching us. Our lifestyle should testify of the saving grace of Christ. You'll never know if someone will come to Christ because of your actions. God seeks to use people to bring the lost to Christ, and He can use you if you're in right standing with Him.

Conclusion

Peter's trip to see Cornelius was not without controversy. Peter's actions will bring criticism upon himself when, in Acts 11:1-18, he is called upon to answer to the charge of entering the home of a Gentile. Peter ably defends himself, and all agree that he did the right thing.

For too long believers have permitted the "Gentiles" of modern culture to remain those who are untouched with the gospel. Peter's vision tells us today that God disapproves when we pick and choose those members of society whom we think deserve the kingdom of God. All races and ethnic groups should hear the gospel. The Spirit is sending us to our own "Gentile city." How will we answer that call?

Prayer

God of love and mercy, help us to reach those of every nation who need Your saving grace. Encourage us to be ready for them with the gospel of Christ. Through Christ we pray, amen.

Thought to Remember

We have no right to build smaller doors for the kingdom than God originally designed.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

God faithful servants often encounter opposition. Peter's experience in prison and the account of his deliverance is the subject of our next lesson from Acts 12:1-16.

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