

## ACTS 10:1-33

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is truly ground breaking in the history of the church. I know that word is over used today but I think in this case it is a very appropriate word to use. For in this chapter we see God saving a Gentile and teaching Peter that all people both Jew and Gentile are included in his great plan of salvation and therefore are included in His church.

We must not underestimate the massive barrier that existed between Jew and Gentile for the Jew hated the Gentile. Their dislike for the Samaritan was bad enough but that falls into insignificance when it comes to the Jew's hatred of the Gentile.

If the gospel was for all people and if it was going to be preached to all nations then this barrier had to be removed and the Jewish Christians had to learn to accept Gentile Christians on equal terms. The conversion of Cornelius opens the door for the conversion of many Gentiles and opens the door for Gentiles to join the church, which at this stage was predominately Jewish.

For this to happen God had to be at work and we see him clearly at work in this passage.

### 1. PREPARATION OF CORNELIUS AND PETER (vs. 1-23)

In verses 1-8 we see God's hand at work in preparing Cornelius. We know that sinners are dead in sin and therefore salvation does not begin with us desiring Christ but with God's sovereignty working in our hearts and lives. We see this clearly with this man Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, which was an important city, located about 30 miles from Joppa.

Now Cornelius was a centurion of what was known as the Italian Regiment. Now a full Roman battalion at full strength consisted of 6000 men and was divided into ten regiments of 600 men each. A centurion commanded 100 of these men and each division had 60 of these men. These men were considered to be the backbone of the Roman army.

To be appointed a centurion you had to prove yourself to be a strong, responsible and reliable soldier.

But Cornelius was more than a good soldier for he was a devout man who feared God, gave generously to the needy and prayed regularly. He was a religious man who had a seeking heart and this was all part of God's preparation for his salvation. As a man who feared God, God had obviously moved on his darkened soul so that he had abandoned his pagan religion and was keen to worship God.

That devotion to God expressed itself in his generosity to those in need and in prayer (v 2). He had stopped short however of becoming a full convert to the Jewish faith. But God had purposes to save this man and so God continued his preparation by giving him a vision (vs. 2-6). His vision consisted of an angel and it is no wonder that Cornelius was terrified (v 4) but he asked a question "What is it Lord?"

The angel was quick to reassure Cornelius by telling him that God has seen his gifts to the poor and he has heard his prayers (v 4). God knew Cornelius heart, He knew he was a devout person who worshipped him to the best of his knowledge. But despite Cornelius sincerity and devotion to the true God he was not yet saved from his sin and that was because he had not yet heard the gospel or had it explained to him.

But God was arranging things so that he could have the gospel explained to him, so he is told to send servants to Joppa and get Peter. Peter was going to be God's instrument although at first a reluctant one. So Cornelius responded immediately and sent for Peter (vs. 7-8).

Now my dear friends when God has purposes to save he works out the individual circumstances in order that the person that God intends to save can hear the gospel. In Cornelius' heart he had already been at work by convincing him that his Roman pagan religion was false and by getting him to seek the true God.

He became convinced that the true God was worthy of his awe (fear) and ought to be served by giving to the poor and could be prayed too. God it seems held him back from becoming a full-blown Jew with all that is involved with that because Judaism was a hindrance to accepting the gospel not a help.

But God is slowly working out his providence and when the time is right he speaks to him through an angel in a vision and tells him to get Peter because God knew that Peter would be able to instruct Cornelius in the things of God. In the providence of God Peter is nearby in Joppa and we saw last time how God worked in order to get Peter in Joppa for this very moment. In any conversion God is always at work. First of all making us discontent with our own religion or philosophy of life. Then pointing us to the one true God who is to be feared and ultimately through speaking to us not through an angel but through his word and very often he uses other people to tell the gospel to us and to explain it.

We must have confidence in the Lord to work out every detail of our lives and in the lives of others and particularly to do so when it comes to the matter of salvation. Perhaps we should pray more for God to be at work in the lives of unbelievers and we need to be more sensitive to what God is doing in people's lives.

Look for the signs that people are looking for reality within their lives, perhaps they begin to speak about religious things. Perhaps they might start coming to church or perhaps they might start asking questions about what we believe. We can be sure that no one is converted without God being at work in their lives, sometimes slowly awakening them to the reality of who God is and to the reality of sin.

Having prepared Cornelius to hear the gospel God now has to prepare Peter to go and explain the gospel to Cornelius and see that he is accepted into the church. But for that to happen God had to deal with a big issue that dominated Peter's heart and was a great barrier to him in presenting the gospel to the Gentiles. The very next day as the men sent by Cornelius were on their way Peter received a vision from God.

Peter went up to the rooftop in order to pray because it was noon Peter felt hungry and he wanted to eat something. While his host was preparing the meal he fell into a trance. Now while in this trance Peter saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to the earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. Then he hears a voice and is told to kill and eat.

Now let me explain that the sheet contained both clean and unclean animals and every Jew knew that there were animals that they could eat and some that they were not allowed to eat. These regulations are laid down in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11 and Leviticus 20:25-26).

It was important that Israel should be kept separate from her idolatrous neighbours and such food restrictions would hinder social interaction with them. Since the coming of the new covenant and the beginning of the church those restrictions are now obsolete, as Peter is about to discover. In

his vision God commanded him to arise, kill and eat. As any devout Jew would have been Peter was horrified. He protested immediately that he has never eaten anything unclean before (v 14).

Peter has zealously kept the dietary laws all his life, believing that the Lord required such a commitment. Peter's strict adherence reflected his devotion to pleasing God. How could he immediately throw all that aside without assaulting his conscience, which was sensitive to dietary requirements?

Peter resisted God's message so he needs to be reminded that what God has declared clean should no longer be considered as unclean (v 15). So ingrained were the dietary regulations into Peter's life that he still could not comprehend what was happening. Finally after this scenario was repeated three times the sheet was taken back to heaven (v 16)

The vision left Peter greatly perplexed and wondering what the vision meant. The meaning was twofold. On the negative side it signified the abolishing of the Old Testament dietary requirements (Mark 7:14-23). Such separating features were now counterproductive since God was bringing Jews and Gentiles together in one church. On the positive side the vision pictured the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles symbolised by the clean and unclean animals into one body the church.

However Peter's perplexity was short lived. At that very moment the men whom Cornelius had sent arrived at Peter's house while Peter was still reflecting upon the vision he had seen. The Lord is about to clear up Peter's confusion, and so that Peter knows that these men are sent by the Lord the Spirit told Peter about the three men who were requesting that he go with them.

He is instructed to go back with them and so once again we see God at work preparing both Cornelius and now Peter.

He was preparing Cornelius for salvation but he is preparing Peter to get rid of his bigotry towards the Gentiles. God had to change Peter so that Peter would be prepared to explain the gospel to Cornelius so that God is able to save Him. Now perhaps God has to deal with some of our prejudices before he can use us to share the gospel to others. It might be that we are prejudiced against those who are wealthy or those who are of a different race or of a different religion. You don't mind sharing the gospel but don't ask me to do it to the blacks or the Muslims. Perhaps it's the homosexual people that we are bigoted against and therefore God has to teach us that God's church includes all types of people.

Black and white people converted Muslims, homosexuals and wealthy people. We all need to examine our own hearts here it might be that there are prejudices that we are unaware of as Peter was unaware of his but which God has to deal with so that we can be made more effective for Him. We also need to remember that God's church is made up of all types of people and all people groups.

There is only one church therefore we should do all we can to make everyone of every race welcome in our church and we must never give the impression that because this is our country that God's church must be made up of British people. I think having people in a local church from different countries and cultures is a great advantage and a richer experience for all that worship there.

## **2. THE OBEDIENCE OF CORNELIUS AND PETER (vs. 23-33)**

Peter and Cornelius model the obedience that God demands both at the point of salvation and throughout the Christian life. The bible repeatedly teaches that obedience accompanies true faith (Matthew 7:21-23). Like Cornelius, Peter obeyed although he probably did not fully understand

what was happening. He went with the men sent by Cornelius and was accompanied by some of the brothers who lived in Joppa.

The next day when they arrived in Caesarea two world views were about to collide as these orthodox Jews are about to meet a household of eager Gentiles. A mile stone in the history of the church has been reached.

Meanwhile Cornelius was waiting for them but he had not been idle while waiting. While eagerly anticipating what Peter had to share with him he had called together his relatives and close friends in order to hear Peter. Imagine the scene as Peter and his Christian friends enter the home of Cornelius and find Cornelius there with his family and friends eager to hear from Peter.

In fact Cornelius was so overwhelmed with the coming of Peter that he falls down at his feet in reverence of him. Immediately Peter tells him to get up for he is just a man he is nobody special and therefore is not worthy of such actions (vs. 25-26). Peter then addresses these Gentiles (read vs. 28-29). Peter begins by telling them that he should not be there since it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles (Acts 11:2-3).

This was a rule made up by the Jews although no doubt taken from the many warnings in the Old Testament about being tempted to worship foreign gods. That was the standard by which Peter up to now had lived his life but now God had taught him that he was not to consider the Gentiles as unclean which is why Peter came without raising any objections when he was sent for by Cornelius.

He was still not sure why he was present in Cornelius house however he asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius replied by relating the specifics about the vision, which he had received (vs. 30-32). Now this meeting only came about because both Cornelius and Peter had been prepared to obey the Lord and in Peter's case to go against his own conscience in order to do so.

The lesson for us is that unquestionable obedience is essential if God is going to use us in the way that he used Peter and Cornelius. It was not easy for Peter in particular to give up his long held traditional views in order to meet with Cornelius.

To go against your conscience is never an easy thing to do but as I said a few weeks ago when going through Romans, our conscience is not always right and it can become distorted by wrong thinking. But we need to have a clear understanding of the doctrine of God's word that when God's word and our conscience clashes then God's word must always be obeyed.

It was only as both these men obeyed God that Peter's thinking was corrected and that Cornelius was saved. If you are an unbeliever today then to be saved from your sin you must obey God's word. That means that you acknowledge that you are a sinner and that you must repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot be saved without obeying God on this matter.

For those of us who are Christians we must obey God's word in everything, even when we have held traditional view on something if God exposes our wrong thinking then we must humble ourselves and submit to God's authoritative word. When we do then God by his providential leading will use us for his own purposes and glory. Perhaps like Peter he will see fit to lead us to people whom he has chosen to save. But the key is obedience that was the key to Cornelius being saved and the key to people being used by God in the salvation process.

Let us be people who are keen to obey God. That when we read our bibles we do so with a determination that whatever God says we will do even if that means going against a view that we have held for years.

May God give us the grace to obey Him?

Amen