

ACTS
The Seeking Sinner and the Bigoted Believer
Acts 10:1-23a

Acts chapters ten and eleven are very significant in the progress of the Christian Faith. Two whole chapters are given over to the opening of the door for the gospel to go to Gentiles as a group with Apostolic sanction. Other Gentiles had been saved before this time, such as the Ethiopian Eunuch but this is the first time in the book of Acts that Gentiles as a group are officially taken the good news of Christ. The receiving of Gentiles into the Church was part of the original plan of Christ for His Church. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It was now time for the gospel of Christ to go into “the remotest part of the earth” which would include Gentiles and Gentile nations. Since the Apostles had received this commission from Christ, it had been eight years. For the first eight years of the Christian Church’s existence, there had been only Jews. Now, for the first time, the gospel goes to Gentiles.

Were the Apostles slow in carrying out the Great Commission? Were they slow to really grasp God's program for the world? My personal opinion is that the Apostles, even though ordained and taught by Christ and filled with the Spirit, because of their learned prejudices about Gentiles, took longer than necessary to begin to carry the gospel to the Gentile nations. In Acts 10, we see this in a very pronounced way, for we see God having to send a Gentile to Peter and God preparing Peter to accept a Gentile. God had to do unusual supernatural phenomena for the Apostles finally to get the whole picture on world-wide evangelism.

Acts 10:1-23a is all about Cornelius, a seeking sinner, who was desperate to be saved, and Peter, a legalistic, bigoted, prejudiced saint, who had to have a special revelation from God to overcome his traditions, background and culture to bring this seeking Gentile sinner the gospel. This section of Scripture is very convicting, so please open your mind to the truth of the Bible and apply it into a twentieth century context.

CORNELIUS: THE SEEKING SINNER (Acts 10:1-8)

Description of Cornelius (10:1, 2)

We simply never know how God is going to work. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8, 9). Humanly speaking, Cornelius may have been our last choice to open the doors of the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. Why would God pick a military man instead of a Roman dignitary? Why would He pick a religious man for it would be more sensational to save some famous rank pagan Gentile? God has His reasons for everything and He does what He pleases and He does not always tell us why. Yet, whatever He does, He does for His own glory.

His Occupation (v. 1): “Now there was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what is called the Italian cohort (battalion),” -- Caesarea was situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and was a beautiful, flourishing city. It was built by Herod the Great and was named in honor of Augustus Caesar, the Roman Emperor at that time. Caesarea was really a Roman city and the Roman governor made his home there. Caesarea was also a Roman military town and stationed in that city was Cornelius. He was a centurion. The Roman army was divided up into legions of 6,000 men, and these 6,000 men were divided into cohorts or bands (battalions) of 600 men, and these 600 men were divided into centuries of 100 men each. Cornelius was a centurion in that he was a captain who had a hundred men directly under his command. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman Army, and they not only had to be rough and tough soldiers, but also had to be diplomats, especially when they served on foreign soil. They had to be well acquainted with the ideas and culture of the land they were occupying. Cornelius, therefore, probably spoke Latin, Greek and Aramic. Cornelius was part of the

Italian band because these were elite troops recruited only in Italy. Whether he was a nobleman who had been given his commission or a commoner who had worked his way up the ranks, we cannot be sure. Whatever, Cornelius was a career man, a seasoned soldier, well disciplined and a rugged individualist.

This example of Cornelius should show us that the military is a respectable and honorable profession. When Cornelius was saved, he never stopped being a professional soldier, nor did Peter tell Cornelius that one of the conditions for becoming a Christian was to be a pacifist. Converted soldiers quite often make great Christians because they understand the importance of a disciplined life.

His Spiritual Orientation (v. 2): “. . . a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually.” -- Cornelius had a religious orientation. He was a “devout man” in that he had a high concept of a monotheistic God over against his ancestors who were polytheists. He worshiped well and lived up to the light that he had from God in common grace. He also “feared God” in that he had a deep respect and awe of the God he worshiped. Cornelius was not a Jewish proselyte but was greatly attracted to the Jewish concept of God. To be a Jewish proselyte he would have to be circumcised and baptize himself by dipping but there is no evidence that he had done these things. He gravitated towards Judaism and could be called a “proselyte at the gate.” Apparently he had grown tired of the polytheism of his fathers and attended the synagogue where the Old Testament Scriptures were read and taught. His religion overflowed into the life of his family, for his whole household believed as he did. He also carried his religion out in a practical way in that he “gave many alms” and because of this he was highly respected by the Jews.

“And they said, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you’” (Acts 10:22).

He was a generous man, and more than that, he was a praying man, for “he prayed to God continually.”

Cornelius was an admirable person. He was devout, sincere, generous, moral and religious, but he was not regenerated. He was lacking true salvation. He was a religious man but not a Christian man. He was not saved and this is clearly stated in the Bible. “. . . and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved and all your household” (Acts 11:14). Cornelius, while having a high degree of common grace as a creature of God, did not have special grace from Christ which saves the soul from sin. He was a God-fearing man and a good man by human standards, but he fell short of God's standard and needed a Savior.

While Cornelius was not a saved man, he was a seeker after the One, True and Living God. It appears that his prayers were that he might know in a vital way God, and apparently his present religion had not brought him the peace, contentment and assurance his own soul needed. Apparently, he had an open and hungry heart for the truth but was not yet saved.

Cornelius helps us understand the real spiritual condition of a heathen man who has never heard of Jesus Christ and is seemingly living up to the light he has. If a man begins to live up to the light that he does have, God will give him more light and lead him to the place where he will hear the gospel and be saved. An unsaved man has the promise that “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (filled)” (Matt. 5:6) and “you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). If the unsaved man seeks truth honestly, he will find the truth in Christ.

You remember when Gus Marwieh was with us at our last Missions Conference. He told us how, as an idol worshiper in the jungles of Liberia, Africa, he began to seek for the true God. He hungered, he sought, he wanted to know God. Through a series of circumstances he walked out of the jungle and came into contact with some Christians. He was gloriously saved. He sought more light and God made sure he would come into contact with someone who could give him the gospel of Christ.

Perhaps we could say that Cornelius is like the modern man who believes in God, attends church on special occasions, is friendly towards the church, but is not a true Christian. He has light about God but is not “born

again.” There are many people today who are moral, upright, generous and even religious but are not true Christians. They may be close to the kingdom but they are not in the kingdom because they do not know Christ nor have they committed to Him personally.

Vision of Cornelius (10:3-6)

“About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in to him, and said to him, ‘Cornelius!’ And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ And he said to him, ‘Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now dispatch some men to Joppa, and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a certain tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.’” -- Cornelius was praying at the regular three o'clock afternoon prayer time when an angel appeared to him. Perhaps Cornelius was praying with an aching heart something like this, “O, God, if I could only know you personally! If you would only fill the void in my life!” He was not expecting an angel and he was startled but he kept his cool and replied in good military fashion, “What is it, Sir?” (“Lord” can be translated “Sir”). The angel then made a statement that seems at first glance to indicate Cornelius merited something from God. He said, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” This, however, does not imply that Cornelius somehow did something to merit his salvation, for the Bible says, “We have all gone astray, We have turned, everyone, to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). This does, however, imply that when a man seeks God (as he is being drawn by God) he will find God. God was merely taking note of a hungry heart, a searching soul, for the Bible does say, “He who seeks finds” (Matt. 7:8). God never says, “Seek Me in vain!” No, if a man will follow the light he does have, he will receive more light until he finds Christ and then his search for salvation will end.

My own quest for salvation was something like that of Cornelius's search. I was born in a pagan, non-Christian home, but from my youth I knew there was a God. In my youth I attended the Mormon Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Christian Science Church. At one point in high school, I said the Lord's Prayer every night. I went to a liberal church occasionally and attended a youth group regularly, but I never heard the gospel. I even did a few good deeds. In college I was still searching and I heard about Christ my freshman year. At that time I made some kind of superficial, external profession of Christ, but I was not saved. I even gave my testimony and people were blessed, but I was not converted. Finally, in my junior year at college, Christ came into my life and I took Him as my Lord and Savior. From that time, I stopped searching for a personal relationship with God because I had found it through Christ.

Notice how God gets the gospel to Cornelius. He did not do it through an angel. Why didn't God just have the angel tell Cornelius about Christ? Because God has commissioned men, not angels, to preach the good news of Christ to this world. God sent an angel to Cornelius but he tells him where he can find a man who can tell him about true salvation in Christ. God has ordained, beloved, that the gospel should be preached by men like you and me. What a humbling thought and what a high responsibility.

Submission of Cornelius (10:7, 8)

“And when the angel who was speaking to him had departed, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were in attendance upon him, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.” -- As a good soldier, who knows how to take commands as well as give them, Cornelius sent three soldiers, one a devout, religious man (probably influenced by Cornelius), to find Peter who was staying at the home of Simon the Tanner near the sea in Joppa. The mention of Simon the Tanner is significant to prepare Peter for the vision he will receive in Joppa concerning the salvation of the Gentiles. Remember Simon was a tanner and that was an unclean trade, for to make leather items the killing and handling of dead animals was absolutely necessary. A tanner was a social outcast according to Jewish law. These three men certainly would not have a hard time finding the tanner's home, for all they would have to do is follow their noses. It was a smelly job. Yet, Peter was staying with this tanner because, apparently, he was a born again Christian. Peter, as a good religious Jew, would have nothing to do with a tanner, but after Peter's conversion and the tanner's conversion, Peter had to set aside his Jewish traditions and prejudices and stay with the tanner as a brother in Christ. This experience was preparatory for Peter who would have to overcome the greatest Jewish prejudice of all which was to accept the Gentile. God was helping Peter come to grips with his prejudices so he could be an effective witness for Christ.

PETER: THE BIGOTED BELIEVER (Acts 10:9-23)

Vision of Peter (10:9-16)

In order to break down Peter's Jewish prejudices against Gentiles, God had to give him a special revelation. He received a vision from God.

Conditions for the Vision (v. 9, 10): “And on the next day, as they were on their way, and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat, but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; . . .” -- Right here we see the providence of God at work, for while Cornelius's men were coming to get Peter, God was preparing Peter through a vision. This teaches us that God is working all things out according to the counsel of His own will, for God was not only working in the heart of Cornelius but also in the heart of Peter. At twelve noon, Peter went to a roof top to pray. The houses in Palestine were often small and crowded and one of the favorite places to pray was on the flat roof top of the home where a little peace and quiet could be found for meditation. As he was praying, he grew hungry and became drowsy because of the hot sun. He probably looked out over the Mediterranean Sea and saw a huge white sail on a boat that blended into the blue sky of heaven. As he stared, God used this to give Peter a supernatural vision, and he fell into an ecstatic trance.

Content of the Vision (v. 11, 12): “. . . and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air.” -- What a strange sight for Peter. He saw a sheet like a tarpaulin knotted up on four corners being lowered from heaven with all kinds of animals in it. What Peter saw horrified him because it was a ghastly sight for a Jew. He saw this sheet filled with clean and unclean animals according to Jewish law. The four-footed animals surely included the unclean hog as well as the clean sheep and cow. According to the Old Testament, every crawling thing was unclean.

Remember, the Apostle Peter was to open the door for the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles as a group. These clean and unclean animals all had a symbolic meaning which Peter would later come to understand completely. The sheet containing the clean and unclean animals represented all of humanity made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The clean animals were the Jews and the unclean animals were the Gentiles. The Jews hated the Gentiles. They thought them common and unclean. In fact, if a Jew even touched a Gentile on the street, he had to go home immediately and wash. A Gentile, if possible, was not to be spoken to and never invited into a Jewish home. The Jews felt themselves superior to the Gentiles and were filled with prejudice, pride, bigotry and snobbishness. The Jews often referred to the Gentiles as “dogs.” The Old Testament taught that Jews were to be a separate people but they perverted this so as to believe they were a super race and they were to have no dealings at all with Gentiles. A Jew's religion, culture and background taught him to have no social intercourse with the Gentiles. Now perhaps we can understand better why Peter had to have this vision of clean and unclean animals. God was teaching him that the Gentile was no longer unclean.

Command to Kill (v. 13): “And a voice came to him, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat!’” -- God was saying, “If you are hungry, Peter, kill and eat.” Every good religious Jew had scruples. The Jew could eat clean animals who chewed the cud or were cloven footed, but they were strictly forbidden to eat unclean animals. Peter was told by God to “kill and eat” all the animals in this sheet. This command must have turned Peter's stomach for it was against Jewish dietary laws to eat an unclean animal of any kind. Remember, even though Peter was a converted man to Christ, he was still Jewish and much of his Jewish culture, tradition and background was still with him. God was not only telling Peter that the Jewish dietary laws have been done away with since Christ has come, but He was stating symbolically a far greater truth. Gentiles are no longer unclean. The message of Jesus Christ is for all Gentiles and all Gentile nations. When a Gentile believes in Christ, his uncleanness passes away and he is accepted in Christ Jesus. When God says, “Arise, Peter, kill and eat!” He is trying to heal Peter's spirit and attitude. God is breaking Peter's prejudice, pride, bigotry and religious snobbery so that he will take the gospel to Gentiles and accept an unclean Gentile as clean in Christ. Peter could never be as effective for Christ as God wanted him to be until he dealt with his learned prejudices.

Contradiction by Peter (v. 14): “But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.’” -- God told Peter to kill and eat the unclean as well as the clean animals, and Peter immediately began arguing with the Lord. Even though God had commanded him to eat, he could not come over his religious prejudices and Jewish culture. Here was a true Christian, even an Apostle, who would not come over his personal hangups and obey what the Lord told him to do. This is a great contradiction on Peter's part, for it is inconsistent to say “Lord,” and “By no means,” (KJV says “Not so”) in the same breath. If we say “Lord,” we must not say “Not so” and if we say “Not so” then we must not say “Lord.” We must understand that Jesus Christ is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all. How many Christians are like Peter who say “Lord,” and then argue with Him or disobey Him? If Peter, who was an Apostle, had a Lordship problem, then it is reasonable to assume that all Christians like you and me will also struggle with bringing our prejudices, bigotries, traditions, cultural patterns and hangups under the Lordship of Christ. Peter was not only saying that he would not eat unclean animals but he was saying he would not mingle with Gentiles; he would not take Gentiles the message of Christ; he would not accept Gentiles who believe in Christ. Peter had some tremendous hangups to overcome before he could be an effective witness for Christ.

When Peter said, “I have never eaten anything unholy or unclean,” we see his legalistic spirit. He was proud of the fact that he had never done certain things and had a haughty, superior attitude about it. Legalism is when a person is proud of the fact that he does not do certain things and tries either to force this same conviction on someone else or looks down the nose at someone who does a certain practice. As Christians, there are certain negative things we will not do because they are forbidden in the Bible and we must not do them. However, we must not become proud in our obedience to the negative commands and principles of Scripture. Pride about negatives never impresses the non-Christian world. Only a positive Christian attitude about life is attractive to the non-Christian world.

Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California makes some interesting comments. He says,

“The world is not impressed by the fact that we Christians will not do certain things. We say, ‘I don't dance, I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't chew; I don't go out with girls that do,’ and we expect the world to be impressed. Well, they are not impressed at all. There are many of them who will not do certain things for reasons other than religion. There is no merit in that. No, if all we can say is that we don't do certain things then we have nothing at all to interest a non-Christian.

What non-Christians are looking for are Christians who are able to do, able to live at a level of life that no non-Christian can, who have hearts that are filled with faith and confidence in the midst of a tumultuous and crumbling age. What impresses the non-Christian is to observe Christians whose homes are filled with loving acceptance of one another, who can communicate with each other, and thus are able to have a home that is bound together with warmth, joy and peace in the midst of a world where homes are falling apart on every hand. In short, they are impressed by Christians who are able to do, not able not to do.”

Repetition of the Command (v. 15, 16): “And again a voice came to him a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’” And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.” -- Apparently Peter was a slow learner. He was so steeped in prejudice that he had to sit through the movie three times before he got the meaning of the plot. He not only had to understand that unclean meats were now clean to eat, but more importantly, that Gentiles who receive Jesus Christ are clean. Therefore, if God has cleansed the Gentile in Christ, no longer consider them unholy.

“. . . the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel . . .” (Eph. 3:4b-6).

Just as Peter carried much of his cultural prejudices and religious traditions of his old life into his new life in Christ, so we too, as twentieth century Christians have cultural prejudices and religious traditions which carryover into our

lives as new creatures in Christ. First, we often even as Christians, refuse to forgive ourselves after we have trusted Christ for the horrible things we have done before becoming a Christian. If we fail to forgive ourselves, we are making God a liar. What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy! Second, we sometimes refuse to forgive others who have had a very sordid and seamy life before conversion to Christ. We brand them, hold their past against them and refuse to accept them. What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy! Third, often we cannot accept the cultural differences that someone has as he or she enters the Church, the body of Christ. Perhaps a person has been saved out of a hippie kind of background and, as a new Christian, the person comes to church with bare feet, blue jeans, long hair, a black leather jacket and a dirty tee shirt which says on it, "Smile, God loves you!" As middle class Americans, this may shock our sense of decency and morality. Be patient, beloved, after a time these sub-culture people will clean up on the outside as well as on the inside. What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy! Fourth, quite often it is difficult to accept another man because of the color of his skin. Perhaps he is black, or yellow, or brown, or red or even white. What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy! Any prejudice because of color, background or past is contrary to the whole spirit of Christ. If God had to teach this lesson to the Apostle Peter, how much more do you and I, beloved, need to be deeply convicted about prejudices and ask God to teach us out of them? We will never be an effective witness for Christ until we come to grips with our learned prejudices. Remember, the traditions, wrong patterns, and prejudices we have followed since childhood will keep us from fully understanding and applying the implications of Scripture in all areas of life.

Ray Stedman tells of a story that was related to him by his daughter when she was attending Wheaton College in the 1960's.

Dr. Hudson Armerding, the President of Wheaton, got up in chapel and shared with the entire student body the dilemma that he was facing as a college president. Many supporters of the school were becoming upset by the fact that when they visited the campus they saw many long-haired youths there, and many with beards. This bothered them greatly and they had refused to give money because of it. Dr. Armerding said the school was in a financial bind because of this trend. He went on to explain that the whole operation of the school was being threatened by the withholding of funds by certain donors who had been strong supporters of the school. The whole student body sat there breathlessly waiting to learn what the administration's stand would be.

Then Dr. Armerding called out of the audience the young man who had the longest hair and beard in the whole school, and asked him to come up. This was a complete surprise to the young man, but he came up to the platform. Dr. Armerding turned to him and said, "You have long hair, and you have a long beard. You represent the very thing that these supporters of the school are against. I want you to know that the administration of this school does not feel as they do. We accept you, and we love you. We believe that you are here to seek and to find the truth as it is in Jesus Christ." And he reached out and embraced him! The student body rose as one man in a moment of acclaim for their President, for his expression of that kind of love and acceptance.

Confusion of Peter (10:17, 18)

"Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; and calling out they were asking whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there." -- Peter was perplexed about the whole vision and did not understand all that he knew about it. These three soldiers knew better than to enter the home of a Jew, even that of a lowly tanner, so they stood on the outside and called for Peter.

Progression of Peter (10:19-22)

"And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go down stairs, and accompany them without misgivings (doubting), for I have sent them Myself.' And Peter went down to the men and said, 'Behold, I am the one you are looking for, what is the reason for which you have come?' And they said, 'Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous man and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.'" -- Just as the men arrived at the house of Simon the Tanner, the Spirit spoke to Peter that he was to go with them. We see again how God was working all things out according to the counsel of His own

will. Peter was to go with them without doubting. Remember, these men were Gentiles and this was a big step of faith for Peter to say he would go with them. Slowly, Peter is implementing the meaning of the vision into his practical experience. He had intellectual understanding that Gentiles were not unclean but it took longer for his heart to come in line with his mind.

Submission of Peter (10:23a)

“And he invited them in and gave them lodging.” -- Peter was getting the message from his head to his heart. He invited these three Gentile soldiers into the home of Simon the Tanner and they lodged there for the night. Peter was beginning to understand grace and was coming to grips with his prejudices and hangups. When a man comes to Christ, Christ makes that man face his cultural, religious and personal bigotries. As with Peter, this does not come overnight but it will come, and a person will never truly be effective for Christ until these prejudices are honestly placed under the Lordship of Christ.

For you who are not yet Christians, what is the lesson you can learn from the life of Cornelius? Cornelius teaches the insufficiency of human goodness for salvation. Cornelius was a good man, a sincere man, a devout man, a benevolent man, a generous man, a family man, a witnessing man, a religious man, a praying man and a seeking man, but he was not a Christian man. It was not until he heard the message of Jesus Christ from Peter and responded to Christ by faith that he was truly saved, born again and a man in whom Christ lived. Are you saved, friend? You may be religious and not regenerated. You may be humanly good but not born of God. You may be a churchman and not a true Christian. You are not a Christian until you put your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior alone to save you. What lesson can you learn from the life of Peter? God is saving unclean Gentiles through Christ. He can take unclean, low-down sinners and make them clean. What God has cleansed, no man must call unholy. Harry Ironside told the story of his father's death. As his father was dying, this passage in Acts 10 was running through his father's mind. He kept repeating, “A great sheet and wild beasts, and - and - and - . . .” He could not seem to get the next word out, but went back and started over, and once more came to that same place. Finally a friend bent over and whispered, “John, it says, “creeping things.” “Oh yes,” he said, “that is how I got in. Just a poor, good-for-nothing creeping thing, but I got in - saved by grace.” Are you an unsaved Gentile? I have news for you. God is saving creeping things. No matter how low, vile, utterly useless, corrupt or unclean you are or feel, God will save you if you will rest your soul on Jesus Christ and receive Him as your personal Lord and Savior. What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy!