

Acts 10

Cornelius Calls for Peter and Peter's Vision (Acts 10:1-23)

Cornelius is an Italian army officer. His rank would be equivalent to a captain in a modern army. The centurions were the backbone of the Roman Army and were chosen for their willingness to remain faithful and hold their ground even in the face of sure defeat. This man is a "God-fearing Gentile". He believes in the God of the Jews, prays to Him regularly, probably attended Synagogue services and is generous in his outreach to the needy in the Jewish community. However, he has not made a decision to become an official convert to Judaism (a proselyte), which would include circumcision.

At about 3 in the afternoon – the time for evening prayers – Cornelius has a vision of an angel of God. The angel tells him to send men to find Peter who is clearly named and specific directions are given to find the house. (This echoes the call of the shepherds in Luke 2 – an angel tells them to go and find the one who is to be savior). God recognized Cornelius' piety but he had to send for Peter to get the message of salvation through Christ because good works and piety are not enough. He acted on the light that he had and because he was truly seeking God, God intervened so that Cornelius could find the path to salvation.

Peter is in Joppa and staying with a man named Simon the tanner. Remember, Peter came to Joppa to pray for a dead woman and God raised her up from the dead. Now he is staying with a tanner of hides – that is some one who works with the hides of dead animals. This type of a person would have been considered unclean. God's power is being seen in the midst of uncleanness in Joppa. The fact that Peter is there in the house of the tanner may be an indication that God is working on his heart about this whole area of what is clean and what is not clean before God.

About noon, Peter is on the roof praying. The roof would have been a quiet place to look out over the sea, enjoy the breeze, perhaps under an awning. At this point Peter becomes hungry and probably requested food from his host. While he is waiting for the food to be prepared – he falls into a trance and a large sheet like a sail come down from heaven. It contains all kinds of animals – both ritually clean and unclean. Peter is instructed to kill and eat, he refuses and this happens three times before the sheet is taken back into heaven.

The meaning of the vision is clear. God is changing a command in the OT that was based the preservation of the people of Israel and the maintenance of them apart from the nations so that God could get a working model of his will and desire for mankind functioning. Now, however, the objective is to bless all of the families of the earth by taking the people of God to the nations to live out that model of God's character in human form.

Peter “stretches” in faith, God speaks, and Peter is called to obey a greater stretch of his comfort zone. This is how the kingdom of God expands and this is how our personal discipleship grows.

While Peter is wondering about the vision, Cornelius’ messengers are arriving at the gate to the house. They have traveled the 30 miles either on horse back or marching through the night. Peter is instructed by the Spirit not to hesitate in going with them. This was not easy because this would mean going with Gentiles into their homes. Peter invites them to spend the night because they will be ready to leave the next morning.

There is a connection between table fellowship and the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. This is why God uses the dietary laws as a point of comparison with the gentiles as a race of people. For Peter to enter the home of Cornelius and accept his food and hospitality would be an indication of friendship and intimacy that would be very difficult for a Jew.

Peter at Cornelius’ House (Acts 10:24-48)

The ten people Peter, six Jewish Christians and the three Gentile messengers all head out to the north on the 9-10 hour walk to Caesarea. When they arrive Cornelius falls down before Peter in worship and Peter tells him to stand up. Then Peter explains that God had instructed him to act “against the Tradition” of not associating with Gentiles. Here we see a contrast between two faulty concepts that are extremes. The first is that no man is to be treated as a God and the second is that no man is to be treated as a Dog. One was a Gentile tendency and the other was the Jewish tendency.

Cornelius states that he was in his house praying and then the angel responded that God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. In Exodus 3:7, God heard the cries of the people of Israel in Egypt and sent Moses to rescue them. This seems to echo the exodus again, just like the conversion of Paul. Cornelius says that they are here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. You can’t get a better audience than that.

Peter begins by making a statement that sounds like “Universalism” in verses 34-35. This is not the case, however, because the very context of the angel appearing to Cornelius is proof that fearing God and doing good is not enough for salvation. God intervenes to provide this seeker with the message of Christ and his death and resurrection. He then launches in to a discussion of the facts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, citing proof that Christ had lived and that his resurrection was indeed true. They were witnesses to that fact.

At about this point he is interrupted by the Holy Spirit who falls on them – the Spirit is poured out like it was on the day of Pentecost. This is validated by the speaking of tongues. Peter then is compelled to offer them water baptism on the grounds that if they are acceptable to God and the Spirit then they are to the Church. He then stays with them and enjoys their hospitality, which would have been a real stretch for him as a Jew.