

## *THE EXTRAORDINARY CASE OF CORNELIUS*

I am sure that most of you are very aware of the fact that the book of Acts—5<sup>th</sup> book in the New Testament—contains a number of examples of people becoming Christians. Some of these examples are of a large group, such as in Acts 2, where the writer tells us, “*So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*” In Acts 8, there is an account given to us of the conversion of one man, an Ethiopian official. There are numerous examples found in the book of Acts, and if a person is serious about wanting to know and do the will of God, they would do well to do an in-depth study of each of those. There is one example of conversion that is especially worth special investigation, and that is *the extraordinary case of Cornelius* found in the chapter 10 and the first 18 verses of chapter 11. The Holy Spirit must have thought it was a special case because more space is devoted to this one example than any other in the book of Acts.

Probably through the years you have heard a number of sermons on the conversion of Cornelius and members of his household. Many of those were probably calling attention to this being the conversion of the first Gentiles. Because of that, there are some unusual things mentioned in connection with this case. We read about a Gentile whose prayers and alms had come up before God as a memorial—that is, something which God would remember. This example also provided the second and only other example of the baptism of the Holy Spirit; the first being that of the apostles in Acts 2. Both of those are matters that ought to be seriously considered in researching Christian teachings and practices, but this morning, I want to draw your attention to *the extraordinary case of Cornelius* for a different reason. I want you to spend some time with me looking at some things Cornelius said, that are truly extraordinary.

You remember the example, I’m sure. As chapter 10 begins, we are introduced to a Roman soldier named Cornelius. He was a centurion of what known as the Italian Cohort. That simply means that he was the commander of one hundred men, and one of six such men in the military unit that had been stationed in Caesarea, which was a city on the shores of the Mediterranean. Caesarea was where the rulers appointed by Rome lived and executed their office. Verse 2 says a number of laudatory things about Cornelius, such as that he was a devout man, which meant he was a believer in God, and took his faith with great seriousness. He was one who feared God with all of his household. In other words, he tried to

teach and influence everyone in his household about God, from wife and children, to his household servants. He was a generous man, giving alms generously to the people—that is to the Jews but possibly to anyone in need. Finally, Luke tells us that he prayed to God continually. That is, he scrupulously observed special times of prayer. In fact, the next verse, verse 3, we learn that at the ninth hour—which was a time which many Jews set aside as a time devoted to praying, that is what he was doing.

And while he is in prayer, he receives a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming to him and saying, “Cornelius” which struck terror in his heart. Somehow he managed to get out the words, “What is it Lord?” And the angel responded, saying, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” That let Cornelius know that God was not upset with him, but accepting of his efforts to please Him. And then in the vision, the angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa—which was another city on the coast, about 32 miles away—and have a man brought to him by the name of Simon and also Peter. The angel tells him exactly where Simon is staying and then the vision is ended. Immediately, Cornelius sends two of his servants and one of his soldiers—also a God-fearing man like himself. He sends them to Joppa to find this Simon and bring him to Caesarea. They leave and the next day arrives at where Peter is staying. In the meantime, Peter also has a vision. He sees something that looks like a large sheet being let down from above, filled with all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean, and a voice telling Peter to “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” Well, even in a vision such as this, Peter instinctively recoils at the idea of eating something unclean, meaning something that in the Law of Moses, God had forbidden the Jews to eat. Peter says, *“No Lord, I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”* That is when the voice says, *“What God has made clean, do not call unclean.”* All of that happened three times. About that time the men from Cornelius arrived and were asking for Peter. Peter goes down to meet the men, learns about their mission, asking him to go with them to Caesarea. The next day they leave Joppa and the following day, they arrive at the home of Cornelius and immediately we see why this case of Cornelius is so extraordinary. I’m talking about in addition to the fact that he was a Gentile, and that he and those with him received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

**First of all, I want you to take note of the fact that it was Cornelius’ desire that everyone he knew to be saved.**

Verse 24 says,

*And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.*

Now keep in mind, this man has been told to send for Simon Peter, who when he comes will declare a message by which he and all of his household will be saved! Now, if you were told that, especially by an angel, what would you be thinking? What would you do? It excited Cornelius so much that during the next two or three days he urged as many of his friends to be there as possible. Now, I'm no angel—in fact I'm far from it—but I can tell you this, I can tell your family and friends the same thing Peter told Cornelius!

This man wasn't even a Christian and yet he was more concerned about his relatives and close friends than many of us who have been Christians for years and years! So that's one thing that makes the case of Cornelius so extraordinary.

What makes it even more amazing are some things that Cornelius said.

After Peter and those with him arrived, Peter, probably feeling a little uneasy about being there, explained why he had come even though it was not proper for him as a Jew to enter a Gentile's home. He then asked Cornelius, "*Why have you called me?*" Cornelius then related his vision and his actions, and then in verse 33, he says:

*So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.*

Now there are six things I want you to see, that maybe you may not have noticed before. Six things every one of us would do well to take to heart.

### **#1, Cornelius thought the matter was urgent**

Notice Cornelius said, "*So I sent for you at once.*" Now, keep in mind who this is. Cornelius is a soldier and a commander of soldiers in the service of Rome, stationed at Caesarea. He is a family man, and has a household to see after. He is

a man whose life is now punctuated with times devoted to prayer. There is no doubt that he was a busy man with a lot on his plate, and yet he was wise enough to know this opportunity took precedence over everything else. He didn't whip out his organizer to see when he could work this in. He said, "So I sent for you at once!"

## **#2, Cornelius was a believer in the one God**

Notice Cornelius says, "*Therefore we are all here in the presence of God.*" He didn't say "gods." He didn't say "your God." He said, "we are all here in the presence of God." That's pretty amazing, don't you think? Gentiles were almost universally, polytheists; that is, they believed in many Gods. Do you remember Paul going to the ancient city of Athens? The Bible says that while he was there, his spirit within him was stirred because "the city was full of idols." One source says there were thirty thousand idols in Athens, including the one that Paul spoke to them about, "the unknown god." That is a remarkable figure especially in light of the fact that the population of Athens at this time was probably around ten thousand. They had three gods for every man, woman and child in Athens! They had gods everywhere, and gods for everything.

It is clear that Cornelius had fully embraced the Jew's teaching of Deuteronomy 6:4, that there is one God. He had turned from idols to serve the true and living God.

## **#3, Cornelius believed in the omnipresence of God.**

Notice again, Cornelius' words: "*We are all here in the presence of God.*" Where are they? They are in this man's house, in the coastal city of Caesarea. That is geography, that is information, but as far as this man was concerned, what was far more important was the fact that they were in the presence of God. Again, this would have been an unusual concept for a Gentile. Gentiles believed in local gods. They believed in the gods of the hills, or rivers, or seas. They didn't think in terms of one God everywhere and over all.

Even the Jews had a hard time understanding this. Recall Jacob in Genesis 28. Jacob had to flee from his home in Canaan, and that first night on the road, near the ancient city of Bethel, he had a dream. In the dream, he saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. When he awoke the next morning, remember what he said? In verse 16, Jacob says,

*“Surely the Lord is in this place, and **I did not know it.**”* Here was one of the patriarchs of the Jew’s faith and he thought God was a god of here or there, but not everywhere!

Or think about Jonah. You remember his story, how God wanted him to go to the city of Nineveh, capital city of the Assyrians, who were the Israelites enemies. Jonah was afraid to go preach to them, and he was also afraid if he did, if they people repented, God might spare them, which is exactly what happened. So when God called him, and told him what he wanted him to do, Jonah booked a ship going to Tarshish, thinking that he was going to get away from the presence of the Lord. Verse 3 says, *“So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, **away from the presence of the Lord.**”*

Is the omnipresence of God hard for us to understand? Do we sometimes forget that we are always in the presence of God, even when we are alone, and behind closed doors? Do you remember the words of **Hebrews 4:13**:

*“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*

No creature is hidden from his sight! Are you kidding me? Some of God’s creatures are pretty small, microbes they call them, and God sees every one of those. Do you really think you can hide anything from God?

#### **#4, Cornelius understood that there is an objective body of truth that must be heard, understood, believed and obeyed**

He said, *“...we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”* What is means by *“all that you have been commanded?”* That was talking about the gospel, which Christ had commanded to apostles to go preach. In 11:14, Peter relates how Cornelius had been told to send for him and that Simon would come and *“declare to you **a message** by which you will be saved, you and all your household.”* That message was the gospel.

Now, think about it; what is Cornelius expecting? Was he expecting to be entertained; maybe for Peter to do a little song and a dance? No, well what was he expecting? Was he looking for something exciting? I’m sure he was already excited but I don’t think he was looking to get high on God!

What Cornelius was expecting was for this man Simon Peter to come and declare to him a message by which he and all his household would be saved.

I am afraid too many people today don't want a message that saves them. They want an experience that convinces them they are already saved. The case of Cornelius is extraordinary because he understood that in order for him and his household to be saved, there was a message they needed to hear, and believe, and embrace.

Incidentally, don't you find it interesting that God communicated with Cornelius through a vision in which he had an angel talk to him, but that the angel didn't tell him what he needed to hear and know and do? Did the angel not know? I'm afraid many people today, if an angel spoke to them, they would take that over the gospel. They would conclude that proves they are saved; they've had a vision, they've seen and heard an angel, they don't need anything else. What is it that Paul wrote to the Galatians in 1:8-9?

*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

Think about what Cornelius was expecting. Do you think he was expecting warm fuzzies and personal affirmation. Was he hoping Peter would come and lay some feel-good philosophy and psychology on him? I don't think so. I believe what Cornelius wanted was what God commanded Peter to declare—the gospel. I think he wanted to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and I think the fact that we have gotten away from that is why our world is in the shape it is.

When Cornelius told Peter, “we are all here in the presence of God to hear ALL that you have been commanded you” he wasn't just saying he wanted to hear it and know it. He was fully prepared to obey all that God had commanded Peter to preach. Some people are content to just hear; satisfied that they know the truth, but they never get around to doing what is commanded.

Some practice what might be called “selective obedience.” They want to decide what they will do, not God. This morning’s Bible reading contained the account of the healing of Naaman the Leper. This Syrian general came down with leprosy, and when he learned that there was a prophet in Israel that could heal him, he immediately made his way to Elisha. But when Elisha told him to go dip seven times in the Jordan River, what happened? He came down with a bad case of selective obedience. He didn’t have a problem with the going or the dipping. He didn’t have a problem with the seven times. His problem was the river. As far as he was concerned, there were better rivers back in Syria to bathe in.

I hope you understand that the Bible is not a cafeteria when it comes to the commands of God? We use to have a Furr’s Cafeteria here. I loved that place! You go in, get a tray and go through the line. I’ll take some of that, and that, not that, some of this. That may be good in the cafeteria business, but that is no way to take the Bible.

Well, that’s the lesson for this morning, and I hope you’ve received something worthwhile from it. The case of Cornelius is extraordinary, not just because he was the first gentile to become a Christian, not just because he and his household received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was extraordinary because of the kind of man he was, and because of what he said and did.

- Cornelius wanted everyone he knew to hear what he was going to hear, know what he would know, and do what he was soon to do.
- Cornelius regarded spiritual matters as urgent.
- Cornelius believed in one God, the one God that is everywhere at all times.
- Cornelius understood that the gospel involves an objective message from God that must be heard, understood, believed and obeyed; not just some of it, but all of it.

Is there anyone here this morning like Cornelius, who is needing and wanting to obey the gospel? Have you been putting off your obedience to God, being baptized into Christ? Maybe you have already done that realize you’ve gotten away from that commitment and need to make some changes now in your Christian faith and walk. If you need to come for any reason, will you do it now.

## **Invitation**