

“God-fearing”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 11/01/2020
Text: Acts 10:1-8 at FBC of Newport, NH

10:1 //At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

//4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

//The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

//7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. 8 He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.//

—Acts 10:1-8 (NIV)

This is such a rich and interesting passage. Luke is giving us a glimpse into one of the most important junctions in God’s plan for bringing the Story of Jesus, the Messiah, beyond the confines of the Messiah’s Jewish homeland and people. We take it for granted today that the Gospel of Jesus and Christianity is a world wide movement. We live in a time when the Gospel has literally been received and adopted in countries and cultures all over the planet, regardless of language barriers, background differences, political differences, etc.. But of course that has not always been obvious.

In the eyes of the Jews at the time of Acts chapter ten, Cornelius is a dog. He is background material for the center of the universe—which is the Jewish nation and the temple of God at her heart. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, Savior, Prophet and King. Cornelius is a Roman, a Roman soldier, a gentile, not a Jew. What does Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, have to do with anyone like that?

The answer is about to become known. It’s going to take some doing, but it’s not like it’s a brand new plan.

Just like the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem, this world wide plan has been in God’s heart and mind since the beginning. God says in Isaiah 49:6, “*I will also make you [Israel] a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*” (Isaiah 49:6b) But the time had to be right. And the right time has come to ... the beginnings of the ends of the earth as we watch it come to Cornelius.

Now it’s tempting to make Cornelius out to be like another Mary, or maybe like Zechariah. He is a good, humble man who gets noticed by God for his prayers and offerings to the poor. He is visited by an angel where he is told ...

not that he's going to father a child or anything ... he's told simply to go call a man named Simon Peter, staying in Joppa, to come back to the house of Cornelius. That's it. And that's all it needs to be. This will be one of the biggest turning points in the life of Cornelius and in the ministry of the Church.

We will look at the details later, in the following weeks, of just how this turning point happens. But for this week I want us to look at who it happens to. Who is Cornelius? What kind of a barrier might we ourselves see in his face? And what kind of breakthrough is in this for us?

Cornelius had a number of noble qualities. He wasn't just a Roman soldier; he was a leader, of at least 100 men, probably more. The Romans chose their centurions carefully. They were upstanding citizens, land owners and reliable, solid people. In a very real sense they were the key to the backbone strength of the entire Roman army, and so too, a key to the strength of the whole Roman empire.

On the personal side, Luke tells us that he was generous in giving to the poor and he prayed regularly to God, not to the multiple gods in the Pantheon, but to the only God, the God of the Jews. We know this because Luke identifies Cornelius as a God-fearer. This is a specific term identifying gentiles who were not full converts to Judaism, but were believers in the God of Israel and adherents of the Torah's moral and ethical teachings. Cornelius and all his family were devout in this respect.

And as if there were not enough of an endorsement of the character of this Roman "dog," Luke also records what was said about him by the angel that appeared to him in a vision at 3:00 in the afternoon (a standard Jewish time of prayer). The angel said, "*Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*" (Acts 10:4b) God himself took note of this.

So does all this mean that Cornelius was already saved? Does it mean that he was saved by his good deeds. Why then would he need to be further instructed by that angel to seek out Peter in Joppa and have him come to Caesarea?

It might take more than this sermon to address those questions fully, but we can have a good start here.

Obviously the teaching of the Gospel itself is that Jesus is the one and only way of salvation, no one is saved by their own righteousness of heart or deed, but only by that of Jesus Christ. However, the Gospel also affirms there being salvation even before the preaching of the Gospel. The thief on the cross was saved well before Pentecost and with no obvious sermon preached by Jesus. John the Baptist died before the Gospel was fully lived out by Jesus, yet surely he was saved. As much as the Old Testament is full of examples of corrupt and sinful humanity, it is also replete with examples of faithfulness and salvation, even before the days of Israel or even Abraham.

The deeper idea here is that surely God in Christ was at this work of salvation even before the Incarnation took place in the first century. But to think that means the Incarnation and later preaching of salvation in the name of Jesus couldn't be all that important is very wrong-headed. You see prior to the coming of Christ, salvation would be based on a Savior yet to come. After the coming of Christ, salvation would be based on a Savior who had indeed come and whose name and story is known. He is the one, and only One, who can complete this hope of salvation. Both ways depend on the same Savior and not on one's self.

Personally, in trying to appreciate why people who may already believe in God still need to believe in Jesus Christ, I find it helpful to think in terms of marriage. It's one thing to say you believe in marriage in general, but it's quite another thing to say, "Yes," to the person who proposes to you. Isn't it? And who would say, "Why bother to introduce that woman to this man? She already believes in marriage. What difference does it make for her whether she knows this man or not?" What a foolish thing to think! Yet that is what we are thinking when we wonder why the angel would bother to point Cornelius in the direction of Peter and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sure, Cornelius already believes in the Jewish God. But isn't that all the more reason to introduce him to Christ?

Also, there's something unexpected going on when Christ is preached, first to the Jews and then to the gentiles. It is discovered that by and large the Jews, who say they believe in God, are not believing in God's Son, in fact they killed him and, oddly enough, continue to persecute him. In terms of marriage this is like Adam *saying* he believes in marriage, but when he's introduced to Eve he thinks she's all wrong and sends her packing.

At the same time, the preaching of Christ is going to reveal that the gentiles are much more receptive to the idea, not only of believing in the Jewish God, but of believing in God's Son, Jesus. In terms of marriage, then, it's as if someone who's always avoided marriage or even said they don't believe in marriage—suddenly getting married! Which statement would take priority over the other? Certainly it's the second. This is what Jesus means in the parable of the two sons. One said he'd help his father but didn't, while the other son said he wouldn't but did. Believing in Jesus is the specific doing, the "yes" or the "I do," of marriage to God, as opposed to giving lip service to the general idea. And the Gospel is the way the Bride Groom can be introduced to each and every one of us. We have to leave it to God to sort out the true hearts of people prior to the incarnation. But now that Jesus has come, we can each of us participate in the sorting out of our own hearts by saying "Yes" to Jesus Christ. We can also help others do the same.

Now back to Cornelius. Here was a gentile, but one that was attracted to the God of the Jews. He went to their worship at synagogue, he followed their moral teaching and very possibly was taken by the hope of their Messiah. Like the Jews, this Roman was saying, as best he knew, that he believed in

“marriage,” marriage to the one true God of the Jews. This had not gone unnoticed by God. And God chose Cornelius to be given the opportunity to follow that desire all the way through to his meeting of the Bridegroom through Peter’s preaching of the Gospel. Here, if he says “Yes” to Christ, he will be as betrothed as any Jew can be betrothed to God. If he says, “No” to Christ, then he will be revealing a hypocrisy in his heart that would be good to get out into the open. And like I said, this will not only be the great turning point and breakthrough in the life of Cornelius, it will be a great breakthrough in the ministry of the Church in Jerusalem (and Samaria). Because after this the door will be wide open to “the ends of the earth.”

Now this raises some questions for us, as individuals and as a church.

How many people in the church have yet to break through from being a “God-fearer” to a “God-lover”? How many people in the church are only comfortable with God at a distance? We believe in God like a person who believes in marriage, or says they believe. Yet when it comes to our meeting Jesus and the Good News of his life, death, resurrection and call for us to a committed betrothal for that great white wedding Day yet to come ... we hesitate. We have yet to say, “Yes, I do commit myself to you and you alone as my Lord and Savior.”

Such hesitation is wrong! This keeping Jesus at arms length is wrong. It was tolerated in the days of the Old Testament, but it wasn’t even right then. And now, now that the Bridegroom has come there is no excuse. ... Why would anyone even want an excuse?! We are living in the days where God has been revealed in Jesus Christ and the way has been opened for us to know him like never before. And the God-fearing gentiles are actually the first ones of many more Gentiles to get the point of believing in marriage—the point is to believe in the Bridegroom—Jesus!

And then this question comes up as well: How many of us who do in fact believe in Jesus, as the Bridegroom and not just as a general principle? How many of us recognize a “God-fearing Cornelius” when we see one, not just in our church, but out and about our community and country? How many people outside our comfort zone are we willing to introduce to Christ?

This is a tricky matter. In the case of Cornelius he showed every indication that his heart was open and ready to receive Christ. But as we’ll see next week, it was Peter’s heart that needed work so Cornelius would even hear the Gospel. There were barriers that had to come down, ideas that had to be taken captive to Christ. Not everyone who hears the Gospel is going to be receptive to it. But still it needs to be preached even if just to expose people’s unwillingness.

But here in Acts 10 it’s about the Gospel going out to those who are willing, ready and able to believe, if only given the chance. Are we taking that chance? Are we willing to give others that chance? That great wedding day is coming. And now is the time for the God-fearing to become God-loving.