

## The Design of God—The Salvation of the World

Acts 10:1-8

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The Apostle Paul describes the Church of Jesus Christ composed of not only Jews, but also composed of Gentiles on an equal footing with Jews, as a MYSTERY that was fully revealed in the New Testament (Ephesians 3:4-6). The word “mystery” refers to that which was not previously revealed in all of its fullness in the Old Testament, but now in the New Testament shines forth with brilliant clarity by the revelation of God.

There are pictures and promises of Gentile salvation in the Old Testament (the salvation of Abraham—the father of not only the Jews, but the father of many nations; the salvation of Rahab the harlot and Ruth the Moabite both of whom are in the historical lineage leading to Jesus Christ; the repentance of the city of Nineveh when Jonah preached to them; and prophecies like Psalm 2:8; Psalm 72:11; Psalm 86:9; Isaiah 2:2).

So what was the hidden part of this mystery if the salvation of Gentiles was revealed in the Old Testament? It was that the division between Jews and Gentiles that separated them in the Old Covenant would be removed in the New Covenant so that together, Jew and Gentile believers in Jesus Christ, would become one new man (Ephesians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:28). It is hard for us on this side of the realization of that great mystery to see the earthshaking consequences to the worldview for Jews and Gentiles at that time. That transformation of the Church from being exclusively Jewish to being Jewish/Gentile was as great (if not greater in some respects) as the transformation that occurred in this country when racial slavery was abolished and states were prohibited from denying Black Americans equal protection under the law.

Dear ones, this is what Acts 10 reveals: the New Covenant blessing of the gospel in bringing Jews and Gentiles into the same Visible Church in order to enjoy the same privileges and blessings. This is the beginning of our salvation who are Gentiles! The ceremonies of the Old Covenant that were instituted by God for the Jewish people were designed to keep them separate from the idolatry and false religion of the Gentiles in order to be a pure people, saved by God to worship and serve Him in accordance with His revealed will. However, the ceremonies, feast days, and dietary laws were not intended to be perpetual, but were designed to be temporary in pointing God’s people to Christ and to the blessings of the New Covenant and then to be abolished (they were shadows, but the substance was Christ—Colossians 2:17).

These ceremonies, feast days, and dietary laws were given to God’s people in the Old Covenant as children under age in order to prepare them for the time when they would be brought into the full blessings of their sonship in Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:1-7). So why would those who profess to be Christians want to return to the those ceremonies and laws (like the Jewish feasts and festivals, the blowing of trumpets, dietary laws, etc.) that were intended for children when we now have in Christ and the blessings of the New Covenant all that is ours as the sons of God who have become of mature age? Dear ones, it is not biblical Christianity that returns to the ceremonial practices of the Old Covenant that pointed to Christ (presently or in the future); it is rather a Judaizing Christianity that does so (which was condemned by Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians).

Let us now embark upon the amazing events that God ordained for the Church of Jesus Christ as the gospel was preached in Gentile nations. The main points from our text this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) The Preparation of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2); (2) The Divine Call of God in a Vision (Acts 10:3-6); (3) The Swift Obedience of Cornelius (Acts 10:7-8).

## I. The Preparation of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2).

A. What we are about to cover in our text is the realization of the words of the Lord Jesus before He ascended into heaven in Acts 1:8. Peter had an important place in each of these stages (he preaches in **Jerusalem** in Acts 2; he with John are the means God uses **in Samaria** to bring the full New Covenant blessing of the Holy Spirit in Acts 8; and now he will be called by God to open the door to the **Gentiles** in Acts 10). There were a few recorded incidences of Gentile salvation in the Old Testament (as already mentioned) and in the New Testament (e.g. the centurion's servant that was healed by Jesus in Matthew 8:55ff). The gospel was first to be taken to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). But the gospel and the church were not to end with the Jews—all the nations were to be brought into the Visible Church by means of the gospel, which brings us to this man, Cornelius—the man God chose to be the entrance to the Gentiles.

B. We learn the following information about Cornelius from Acts 10:1-2.

1. He was a centurion (over 100 men) within an Italian (or Roman) band of some 600 soldiers stationed in the coastal port of Caesarea (about 30 miles from Joppa, where Peter had been used of the Lord to raise Tabitha from the dead and where Peter was lodging in the home of Simon, a tanner in Acts 9).

a. The fact that neither Jesus nor Peter condemned the secular calling of the centurions who came to faith through the gospel is interesting; for these centurions served under a pagan emperor (just as did Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon).

b. It would appear that in all of these cases their service to pagan rulers might be lawfully administered under the following condition: That they be not bound to swear or to do that which is contrary to God's Law. God used these godly men to protect His people and to promote reformation among those they served (Cornelius had apparently been used among those he served, Acts 10:7).

2. Being a Roman, Cornelius was a Gentile, not a Jew (nor likely a Gentile proselyte to the Jewish faith, Acts 10:35; Acts 11:3).

a. The spiritual condition of Cornelius before meeting with Peter is one that has been debated among biblical scholars. For here is a Gentile who is devout, fears God, gives alms to the needy among the Jews, and prays to the one true living God constantly (Acts 10:2). Were his prayers heard and received by God? Yes, according to Acts 10:4. Were his alms received by the Lord as "good deeds" acceptable in God's sight? Yes, according to Acts 10:4. Can such prayers and such works be pleasing to the Lord for which the Lord then rewards the unregenerate with faith? Although the Church of Rome may hold forth such a view of merit on the part of sinful man, the Scripture absolutely denies it (Titus 3:5-7). If the works of Cornelius were acceptable apart from Christ—why Christ at all?

b. I suggest that Cornelius was a converted Gentile that had faith in Jesus Christ (though his understanding of the gospel was small and was to become more complete through the testimony of Peter later on in Acts 10). Peter himself makes clear that Cornelius (and those with him) did "know" about Jesus Christ through the word that had been preached throughout Judea and Galilee (Acts 10:36-37). Perhaps Cornelius even had heard the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:40). If Cornelius had heard of Jesus Christ and had placed his faith in Him, then it would certainly make sense as to why his prayers and alms were received by God. In fact, his constant prayers and good deeds were evidence of his faith in Jesus Christ, and not the cause of that faith in Christ.

c. So if Cornelius was already converted through faith in Christ, why was it necessary that God reveal to him that he should call for Peter? Just as the Samaritans first believed through the preaching of Philip (Acts 8) and then God sent them the apostles, Peter and John, to bear witness that Samaritans had received the New Covenant blessing of the Holy Spirit, so that there would not be two distinct churches, a Jewish Church and a Samaritan Church; so likewise here God sent the Apostle Peter to bear

witness to the fact that Gentiles had received the New Covenant blessing of the Holy Spirit (just like the Jews did in Jerusalem, Acts 10:44-45). There was to be one Visible Church of Jesus Christ composed of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles (not three separate and distinct churches), and the testimony of the apostles confirmed it.

d. What then shall we say about the words of Peter in recounting to the brethren in Jerusalem what had happened in Acts 11:14? It is true that Peter did proclaim the gospel of salvation to Cornelius and his household, but New Covenant salvation was not complete until Cornelius had heard that gospel from the lips of Christ's apostle in all of its glory, had received the New Covenant blessing of the Holy Spirit in all of its fullness, and had been baptized with water. Though in the cases of the Samaritans and Cornelius there was faith and then subsequently the full expression of God's Spirit through the agency of Christ's witnesses, His apostles, this does not continue as some pattern, for we are all baptized with the Spirit of God into Christ's body when we believe (1 Corinthians 12:13—many fillings of the Spirit—Ephesians 5:18—but only one baptism with the Holy Spirit which places us in Christ's Church where there is neither Jew nor Greek).

C. I have two points of application to leave with you.

1. God chose a soldier as the one to whom He would open the way in bringing Gentiles into the Visible Church of Jesus Christ. Are we not all called to be soldiers in the cause of Christ in fighting the good fight of faith? Every Christian (without exception) is called to see that the Christian life is not a stroll through the park, but is an all-out war against the world, the flesh, and the devil (1 Timothy 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:3; Ephesians 6:11). Biblical Christianity is a struggle and is a battle against those enemies that would seek to destroy us and take us out of this conflict (through compromise of the truth, through apathy and indifference in our supreme love to Christ, through giving in to the lusts of the flesh, through worldliness that leads us down the broad path, and through discouragement). Dear ones, we cannot afford to take lightly our enemies, nor can we afford to take the eye of faith off our great Captain, His death and resurrection, and His work of grace and power in our lives who has made us more than conquerors (Romans 8:37).

2. Our text tells us that the household of Cornelius likewise feared the Lord—he taught them and lived it before them (Acts 10:2). Dear ones, a faith in Christ and a love for Jesus Christ that does not reach out to your family members to instruct them in loving words and deeds will likely drive them away from Jesus Christ. It is certainly true that family members may be hardened and calloused to Christ's truth due to their own unbelieving hearts, but let us not give them further reason to turn against Jesus by what they see in our speech and conduct. Dear husbands and fathers, Cornelius is an example to us in leading our families to Christ as covenant keepers (Joshua 24:15). Only God can save our children, but we can bring the gospel to them (baptism, worship, and daily lives). The duty is ours, the consequences are God's. The duty of covenant children is to hear and receive these blessings.

## II. The Divine Call of God in a Vision (Acts 10:3-6).

A. Here we see God's call to Cornelius to send for the Apostle Peter, for "he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do" (Acts 10:6). This revelation comes to Cornelius by way of a vision in which Cornelius is not asleep, but is conscious, and yet he supernaturally sees and hears the angel of God speak the word of God to him.

1. Incidentally, God will also shortly thereafter be preparing Peter by way of a vision to receive these very messengers sent by Cornelius (we will consider Peter's vision next Lord's Day, God willing). Although we may not receive a supernatural vision, the events in your life are no less being directed and governed by the Lord according to His own most holy, most good, most wise, and most powerful purposes

(even in regard to your own sin and the sin of others—Genesis 50:20—it all began with a coat of many colors and the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers).

2. Just as God was working in Cornelius and Peter independently, it was with a divine purpose to bring God’s salvation to the Gentile nations. Do not despise the day of small things. God’s purpose was made known to Cornelius while he was praying and in communion with the Lord. Make your worship about Him—not about you—about His greatness and your need of Him. Only then will you be growing in faith to lay hold of God’s purposes even when you do not see or understand them.

B. It was about 3 p.m. (the ninth hour) while Cornelius was praying that the angel of the Lord told Cornelius, “Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4).

1. It would seem likely that this vision was given by the Lord to Cornelius in response to prayers he had offered (like incense upon the altar that ascended into the throne room of God). These were then prayers of faith, perhaps appealing to the Lord to give him more knowledge, understanding, and reformation in the truth and love of the Lord. God leads Cornelius to pray for that which God intends to give to Cornelius (Philippians 2:13; Matthew 7:11).

2. Prayer is the means God uses to show to us His faithfulness, His love, His power, His mercy, His peace, and His control over everything. And dear ones, if the prayer of Cornelius was as incense unto the Lord, so will your prayers be because of the mediation of Jesus Christ. You have every reason to call upon the Lord, and no good reason to neglect, procrastinate, and give Jesus the leftovers of your life.

3. The heavenly visitor issues God’s command to send for Peter. Though at that precise moment when the angel told Cornelius to send for Peter, Peter was not yet ready to receive that call (there was work to do in Peter). Nevertheless, the sovereign Lord was in control and Peter would be ready to go by the exact time the servants of Cornelius arrived at the door of Simon, the tanner. There are no accidents, surprises, early arrivals, or delays in God’s plan for your life (everything is going exactly according to plan—are you learning and trusting Him?).

### **III. The Swift Obedience of Cornelius (Acts 10:7-8).**

A. Cornelius did not delay in obeying the divine message given to him in the vision. As soon as the revelation of God was understood by Cornelius, he obeyed. He did not wait for a few hours. He did not procrastinate to do the will of God. He evidenced his faith by his loving obedience—upon hearing God’s command, Cornelius called and commissioned his servants and one of his faithful soldiers to go to Peter.

1. Although our works do not justify us before God, they do evidence that justification before man (faith without works points to a dead faith). Our obedience to God’s commands is not based upon whether we judge it to be something important or not—there is no such thing as an unimportant command of God. We can offer God no excuses why we will not obey Him. His authority extends to when we are alone.

2. The same absolute and divine authority that commands, “thou shalt have no other gods before me” also commands “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”, and the same absolute authority that commands, “thou shalt not kill” also commands “thou shalt not covet”. Our love is expressed to the Lord Jesus by our swift obedience to His will.

B. There is another way that that professing Christians may be tempted to minimize the command of God. You may be tempted to think, “Well of course, Cornelius received a direct revelation from God to send for Peter and speedily obeyed. But I would do the same thing if I received a direct revelation from God.” Dear ones, you have received direct revelation from God in Holy Scriptures, and none of us have any excuse to treat what God reveals in the Bible as secondary to what God revealed to Cornelius (2 Peter 1:19). Cornelius, being a good soldier, knew how to take commands from his superiors. And one of the most important ways in which

you may see that you are growing and maturing as a good soldier of Jesus is that you will be growing in your submission to the authority of God's revealed will and in your submission to the trials He brings into your life in glorifying Him and in growing you in character, in faith, hope, patience, and perseverance.

Captain John Payton was one of the faithful Covenanters in Scotland who fought the good fight of faith in bravely defending with the sword the lives of fellow Covenanters on a number of occasions, but he especially showed forth the good soldier he was for Jesus Christ in his testimony at the scaffold before he was hung (May 9, 1684). This Covenanter soldier had such an honorable life and reputation that General Dalziel (the persecutor of Covenanters) pled to Charles II for his life (which Charles granted), but the reprieve found its way into the hands of Bishop Paterson who kept it to himself until Captain Payton had been hung.

I bless the Lord I am not come here as a thief or murderer, and I am free of the blood of all men, and hate bloodshed, directly or indirectly; and now I am a poor sinner, and never could merit anything but wrath; and I have no righteousness of my own; all is Jesus Christ's, and His alone.... Now I leave my testimony as a dying man against that horrid usurpation of our Lord's prerogative and crown-right; I mean that supremacy established by law in these lands, which is a manifest usurpation of His crown, for He is given by the Father to be Head of the Church.

May the Lord make you, dear brothers and sisters, good and faithful soldiers of Jesus Christ fighting the good fight of faith until the very end.

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