

Cornelius—God Shows Himself Gracious

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Dear Friends,

How many times has an angel visited and talked with you? That you know was an angel? I suspect that most angelic ministrations are quietly performed without our knowledge. But on needed occasions, the Lord sends them to visibly appear and speak to His people. What an experience for Peter and Cornelius!

And has an angel ever told you that the Lord "Memorialized" your prayers and godly life? The Lord injects into the record of Scripture a few powerful and unique people, describing their spiritual experience so specifically that we cannot miss the truth He teaches us by them. In the case of Cornelius, based on Luke's description of the man and Peter's confession, we cannot respect the simple clear language and miss the obvious teaching; the Lord had saved, "cleansed," Cornelius sometime prior to [Ac 10:2](#), long before Peter arrived and preached to him. Thank you, Lord, for such a rich and powerful lesson.

When we study our present relationship with the Lord, how much do we resort to philosophical reasoning, versus how much we go to Scripture alone? If we listen to human reasoning, we might conclude that no human deserves such blessings as both Peter and Cornelius experienced in this lesson. Ah, but where does Scripture ever teach that our wealth of present spiritual blessings come to us because we deserve them? The Lord sends them to us because He loves us, not because we earned them. Yes, He blesses us in our daily lives with requirements or conditions on our part, and He blesses only as we fulfill those conditions, but the Biblical conditions for spiritual blessings never appear in Scripture as sufficient to earn the blessings. I've occasionally heard naive believers say, "You only get out of your church life what you put into it." The Lord requires certain conditions of us for those blessing but think. If you only received what you invested in serving the Lord, churches would be empty! The Lord always sees to it that we receive infinitely more in blessings than our actions might merit. That is why Scripture refers to them as "Blessings."

Spend much time in studying [Ac 10](#). It teaches us so many powerful truths, and it teaches them so clearly that it will erase much of the humanism that has invaded contemporary Christian culture and teaching.

Lord bless,

Joe Holder

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There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway. He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.

([Ac 10:1-6](#) KJV 1900)

The experience of Cornelius, a Roman officer in command of around a hundred soldiers, teaches many rich truths, one of my favorites in the Book of Acts. We'll focus most of our thoughts in this study on his prayers and God's gracious answer to them. However, let's not pass over some of the richness of the passage.

First, consider Luke's description of Cornelius. To our knowledge from Acts, Cornelius had never heard the gospel. It is possible, given the description of him as "one that feared God with all his house," that he was a Jewish proselyte. Some commentaries and ancient history sources indicate that a Gentile who decided to become a proselyte, a student of Judaism with the objective of becoming, in all points other than his Gentile birth, a Jew, was referred to as a "God-fearer." At the most, we may conclude that he was seriously contemplating Judaism, a major life-change for a Roman military officer. Whether this was the case or not, Luke's description of him is convincing that he had a serious sense of and relationship to the Lord.

In addition to fearing God, Luke describes him as "a devout man." He lived a godly or "devout" life. Despite his position, he did not partake the depraved lifestyle of many others in his position in the Roman army. He also "gave much alms" to those in need, or perhaps to the synagogue to be used for the people. Finally, Luke describes him as praying "...to God always." This man took his understanding of God quite seriously. He tried to live it.

Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. This was the message of an angel that appeared to him around 3:00 P. M., "about the ninth hour of the day." The reckoning of time of day was based on the daylight hours, presumed to begin around 6:00 A. M. I know of no significance of this hour, but the details of the event add strong credibility to the narrative.

After Peter visited Cornelius, and all the amazing things occurred that we read later in this chapter, what might Cornelius have said if someone asked him, "Cornelius, do you believe God responds to the prayers of His people?" Can we doubt for a moment his response, and with conviction. He had lived the experience of an angel's visit telling him that his prayers and godly lifestyle were noticed by the Lord, and the Lord was sending a special blessing to him and his household, also described in the same terms as he in Verse 2, "with all his house." This lesson gives no support to the idea of surrogate faith. His whole household lived the same lifestyle as he.

At this moment, Cornelius did not know what we know, what he and his household would soon experience of the Lord's gracious blessings. If we accept the hint that he may have been a proselyte at this time, Cornelius would have fully expected that his Jewish teachers in the local synagogue would be his "Go-to" teachers to tell him what he "ought to do." But the angel upset his world. A man he never met who lives some distance away, according to the angel, will tell him "what thou oughtest to do," not his synagogue teachers. In Verse 9, we read that Peter went to the housetop to pray around the sixth hour, around noon. Apparently, there were two communities named Caesarea, leaving our estimate of the distance between the two villages in some doubt. The distance was likely between thirty and forty miles.

We often focus on Cornelius and his present spiritual state at the time of Verse 2 when the angel appeared to him. What lay ahead for him would change his life, and for the good. However, we need to examine what the Lord did to Peter in preparation for this event. His life would change fully as much as Cornelius'. Shortly before the messengers from Cornelius arrived, Peter found a quiet place to pray. The Lord showed Peter some unexpected truth that Peter was as unprepared to hear as Cornelius was for his session with the angel. From Verse 11 to Verse 16, Peter experienced the same "Vision" from the Lord three times. He likely needed the repetition to teach him with strong emphasis what the Lord

intended to do. As a Jew, Peter had longstanding habits of following a kosher diet. When all kinds of animals appear before him with the invitation, “Kill and eat,” Peter’s first response was that eating these “Unclean” animals would violate his kosher diet, so he objected. Peter would have been shocked at the response from the angel that spoke to him, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” ([Ac 10:15b](#))

Clearly the Lord’s message to Peter had to do with his challenge to preach to Gentiles, Cornelius and his household, and to witness them being blessed in that miraculous manner that he had experienced uniquely on Pentecost. ([Ac 2](#)) At this point, Peter likely was more “Jewish” than Christian regarding Gentiles. That was soon to change.

We often think of preachers preaching to people who are not familiar with the message of the gospel only in terms of how the message might change the hearers. As a long-time pastor, I can tell you; some of my most memorable experiences in preaching have changed me far more than they likely changed the people to whom I preached. Consider Peter’s transformation after he witnessed the Lord’s blessings on this Gentile household. They heard his message, believed it, and were overpowered by the Holy Spirit, similar to Peter’s experience on Pentecost. Peter could not possibly question or doubt the Lord had cleansed Cornelius and his household long before Peter arrived. His Joppa vision of unclean animals and of the Lord’s message to him, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common,” took on its meaning right before his eyes. **The Lord had already cleansed Cornelius and his household from their sins.** There was no question for Peter now. He joyfully confessed his new understanding.

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. ([Ac 10:34-35](#))

This confession often is tortured by a biased partial quotation, “God is no respecter of persons.” If the folks who practice this partial quote would honestly read Peter’s whole confession, it might transform their beliefs as it did Peter’s.

But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, **is accepted with him.**

Notice Peter’s precise confession. Regardless of nationality or culture, the person who fears God and works righteousness, the precise description we read of Cornelius in [Ac 10:2](#), is, already “**accepted with him.**” Cornelius’ acceptance with God had already occurred. It was not future.

This simple and powerful truth of Scripture shouts from the housetop an unpopular truth that many modern Christians refuse to believe. The Lord saved Cornelius before he heard the gospel and believed in Jesus! Based on Peter’s confession, **Cornelius was saved some time prior to [Ac 2](#), not after Peter arrived and preached to him.** Peter’s confession, affirmed by the angel’s gracious message to him, and Luke’s detailed description of him at that time, makes the point.

Whatever your personal experience of first becoming aware of the Lord and of your sense of love and faith toward Him, it should be a precious treasure in your mind, one that you might profit to visit regularly. Keep your memory of the Lord’s gracious dealings with you ever fresh in your mind.

As with many other praying people in Scripture, we do not read the content of Cornelius’ prayers, only that the Lord took note of them and of his alms, his compassionate giving to those in need. The whole Christian culture of our day needs this godly man’s example. The faith that God memorializes is not all about us and what we want. It is about us caring more for others than for ourselves. You occasionally hear that talk, but you seldom see the action of authentic selfless faith. In our daily decisions, how much effort goes into what we want for self. And how much do we invest in giving up of self and truly giving to others? This Biblical principle is about actions, not words.

In the first century, there were no government programs for the poor. The giving of alms was the sole

funding basis for their care. And Cornelius "...gave **much** alms to the people." Examine your checkbook and your monthly credit card statements. How much goes out to people in need? I fear that the various governmental aid programs have dulled the Christian conscience to this need. All around us we see the growing problem of the homeless. How do we deal with it? If we try to give to individual homeless people, we often feed their addictions, no help to them. But we can't ignore the problem. Rather than offering answers, which I struggle to find personally, I raise the question, one that the broad Christian community needs to discuss. Some of the well-known charitable organizations do a good job of managing what is given to them. Others, some quite popular, do a dreadful job. Before giving to any public charitable group, find a copy of that group's most recent financial report. How much of each dollar they receive goes to their end purpose, caring for those in need, and how much goes into the pockets of those who manage the organization? This "Filter" will enlighten your giving decisions far more than you can imagine till you've actually done it. When the woman broke the container and washed Jesus' feet with the costly ointment, Judas complained; how much could selling that ointment have made available for the poor. But Scripture enlightens Judas' true mindset. He was more interested in adding to the money that he controlled than compassion for the poor. Your examination of financial reports of charitable organizations will tell you as much about them as Scripture tells us about Judas' true motives. ([Joh 12:3-6](#))

What we do on our knees, both in prayer and in personal self-sacrificing service for others; that our Lord "Memorializes" with special blessings. How much of your conduct in the trenches of your life in the last month—or year—was worthy of such a memorial?

Elder Joe Holder