

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

### Message #24

### Acts 10:1-23

There are many Christians who have believed on Jesus Christ who are hung up on all kinds of religious traditions and legalistic rules because they are naïve of true Biblical Grace. I know because at one time I was one of them. I was in a church that loved the Lord but they didn't really know what they were doing with the Word. They formed most of their ideas from denominational ministers who were not very skilled in expounding books of the Bible and dispensationally understanding God's Grace.

This chapter is a critical moment in the Church Age. R.C. Sproul says Acts 10 is not only the most important chapter in Acts, it is one of the most important chapters in the entire New Testament because it brings us out of the old redemptive ways to God's new redemptive grace (*Acts*, p. 180).

It proves the O.T. Law is done and this becomes a key moment when the Gospel of Grace begins to move out to Gentiles. It proves that the Apostle Peter does come to terms with grace and that he sanctions Gentiles as being part of the grace family by faith in Jesus Christ.

Now taking the Gospel to Gentiles and swinging God's program to non-Jews is a major change in God's program. Acts 10 is a key chapter to us because the vast majority of believers today are Gentiles not Jews, and this chapter clearly reveals grace truth concerning Gentiles. The Apostle Peter is about to learn a major lesson and so are we:

**BEFORE ONE MAY ACCURATELY TEACH THE GRACE GOSPEL TO OTHERS, ONE MUST UNDERSTAND IT AND APPLY IT TO HIMSELF; SPECIFICALLY THAT GRACE PUTS AN END TO MOSAIC LAW.**

What Peter is about to finally grasp here is that any person from anywhere in the world may believe on Jesus Christ and be saved, and they are not required to keep the O.T. Mosaic Law. In Acts 9 two men had visions; Saul and Ananias. In Chapter 10 two men have visions; Cornelius and Peter. In these verses there are three heavenly communications that occur:

**HEAVENLY VISION #1** - God gives a vision to Cornelius to go and get Peter. **10:1-8**

There are two main historical realities we may see here:

**Historical Reality #1** - God gives a description of Cornelius. 10:1-2

Cornelius is an unsaved Gentile that God will save and God will bring the Apostle Peter to him to unravel God's Grace Gospel. There are six facts I want you to see:

**(Fact #1) - Cornelius was from Caesarea. 10:1a**

Caesarea was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. It was mainly a Gentile city. It was located about sixty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was named in honor of Caesar Augustus. It was a military headquarters for Roman forces. Caesarea, where Cornelius was located, was about thirty miles north of Joppa where Peter was located. This is a big time Gentile area.

**(Fact #2) - Cornelius was a centurion. 10:1b**

He was a military leader over many men. There is some debate on the actual number of men he led. Some suggest that a Roman legion was a regiment of 6000 men which was comprised of ten cohorts, which would mean a cohort is 600 men. We do know by the name centurion that he was in charge of at least 100 men.

He led a regiment of Italian cohorts. A cohort battalion was somewhat like a voluntary militia that wasn't part of the regular Roman legion. These were highly trained and skilled soldiers and they were under the authority of Cornelius. But it is very obvious that Cornelius was much more than some tough military commander.

**(Fact #3) - Cornelius was a devout man. 10:2a**

Cornelius had a reverent piety to him when it came to God. In fact, the word “devout” (ευσεβης) means he was very reverent when it came to worshipful things (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 189). I find this intriguing because at this point he is not even saved.

Not long ago someone came to faith in Christ in this church. The person told me that they had visited other churches, but the lack of reverence and the night club atmosphere didn't seem right to them. Here was an unsaved person, who had a better perspective of what worship should be than the leaders of a church. Cornelius was like that. He was very reverent in his worship.

**(Fact #4) - Cornelius was a God-fearing man. 10:2b**

Now Cornelius was a God-fearing man, which meant that he was a man who revered the God of Israel. He had a real reverential awe for God as an unsaved man. He had not been circumcised according to the Law (Acts 11:2-3), but he did reverence the God of the Hebrew Bible. Apparently all in his house did too.

**(Fact #5) - Cornelius was a generous man. 10:2c**

He was a man who honored the Jews and helped the Jews. The word “alms” (ελεημοσυνη) means that he demonstrated great mercy and pity to Jewish people and did many generous things for them (Ibid., p. 145).

**(Fact #6)** - Cornelius was a praying man. **10:2d**

As we studied in our doctrine of prayer, there are eight different types of prayer. The word used here for “prayer” (δεησις) is one that indicates he prayed to God with a sense of need (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 99). Cornelius was continually going to God about some need, which we may contextually assume was a prayer concerning the need of understanding and wanting salvation.

**We learn from Acts 11:14 that Cornelius was not a saved man.** This is why Peter is sent to him. Even though he feared God and was religious and devout, he was not saved and he needed someone to come who could present the Gospel of saving grace.

You can be a wonderful religious person and still be lost. You could have gone to a church for years and revered God, sang hymns and given money, but be lost. No matter how pious you are, you need to believe in Jesus Christ and experience God’s grace; that is Cornelius.

**Historical Reality #2** - God gives a vision to Cornelius. **10:3-8**

There are six facts brought out about this vision:

**(Fact #1)** - The vision occurred in the ninth hour of the day. **10:3a**

It was about 3 P.M. Now 3 P.M. was a known Jewish time for prayer (Acts 3:1). Jews would go to the Temple to pray. So Cornelius, even though some sixty-five miles away from Jerusalem, still followed the Jewish custom. This vision occurs during the day when he is awake and not at night when he is asleep.

**(Fact #2)** - The vision contained an angel of God who spoke to Cornelius. **10:3b**

An angel of God comes and calls him by name. God knows every single person by name. Those who are lost and want to know Him and those who are lost and don’t care about Him. He knows them all.

**(Fact #3)** - The vision contained an angel of God who Cornelius actually saw. **10:4a**

Cornelius was completely alarmed. Trained military men typically are not alarmed, but this heavenly vision did it. We may notice that he was focused in that he “fixed his gaze” on this angel. Again, a military leader is one who typically can focus even when facing an unusual and intimidating situation.

**(Fact #4)** - The vision informed Cornelius that his prayers and alms were noticed by God. **10:4b**

Now the angel says that his “prayers” and his “alms” have ascended up as a memorial before “the God” (του θεου). The word the angel uses for “prayer” (προσευχομαι) is different than **verse 2**.

The emphasis of this word is that your prayers have reverently made it to the face and presence of the one and only true God. Cornelius, a Gentile, had a heart that wanted to know God and he had a heart that loved and cared about Israel (**Acts 10:22**).

Charles Baker in his commentary made a very interesting observation. This is the only place in the entire New Testament where God takes into consideration an unsaved man's good works (*Understanding the Book of Acts*, p. 61). **However, we must carefully observe that what God does is to send an apostle to him to unlock the grace Gospel so he may be saved. His good works will not save him.**

What is really interesting is that there is another text of Scripture in which a person's treatment of the Jews will have a bearing on what God does with them. At the end of the Tribulation at the Judgment of the nations, Jesus Christ will open up His Grace to those who were kind to Israel during the terror of the Antichrist (Matthew 25:31-46). In some respects, Cornelius is somewhat of a type of that.

**(Fact #5)** - The vision told Cornelius to send some of his men to Joppa to get Peter. **10:5-6**

The angel gave Cornelius Peter's name and location of where he was staying. Two names are used for Peter, so they would know exactly the one they were to find. We may remember that Peter is staying with a man whose name is Simon the tanner.

He was staying with a tanner by the Mediterranean Sea. Now tanners were required to live outside the city and for sanitary purposes. It kept the smell out of the city and they lived near the sea so they could wash things in the salt water. The angel told him exactly where to find Peter and then disappeared.

Why didn't the angel instruct Cornelius? That is not his job. God instructs people in Grace Age doctrine through apostolic teaching. God uses men to teach others. Even though this is the age of the Holy Spirit, people need someone who understands N.T. grace to teach them.

**(Fact #6)** - The vision ended and Cornelius sent three men to Joppa to get Peter. **10:7-8**

Cornelius sent two servants and one of his soldiers to Joppa to retrieve Peter. The purpose of this is that God is going to sovereignly save Cornelius by opening up for him the Grace Gospel.

We need to realize that very often God will send someone to clearly preach evangelistic apostolic truth from some other place.

**HEAVENLY VISION #2** - God gives a vision to Peter. **10:9-16**

It is no coincidence that Peter is staying in the home of a tanner. Tanners work with animal skins to make leather. They work with dead animal carcasses of all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean. This is exactly where God wanted Peter to be to teach him a lesson in grace theology.

There are three facts that we want to observe about this vision:

**(Fact #1)** - Peter was on the roof praying the next day at the sixth hour. **10:9**

The word “praying” used here is different than the one used in **verse 2**, but the same one used by the angel in **verse 4**. This word means that Peter was actually going into the presence of God in a face to face way. Peter was saved, Cornelius was not saved. Peter’s prayer did go into the presence of God and actually so did Cornelius’s. But the difference is Cornelius couldn’t theologically know it and Peter did.

Now a typical roof was flat and it featured a 3-4 foot wall around it. One could go to the roof and sit or kneel and not be seen by anyone. Thomas Walker said often these housetop areas were used for meditation and recreation (*Acts*, p. 261). Under Mosaic law, a rooftop was required to have a wall or fence so that no one would fall off the roof and make the home owner liable (*Deut.* 22:8).

Up on the roof would be fresh air as a tanner’s house featured many offensive odors, and this would be a good place to escape those odors.

**(Fact #2)** - Peter was praying while dinner was being made and he was getting hungry.  
**10:10a**

This sets the stage for the vision. Peter is hungry and God knows he is hungry and he will use this very context to reveal a major doctrinal point to Peter.

**(Fact #3)** - Peter fell into a trance and saw and heard things that disturbed him. **10:10b-16**

This is a “revelatory trance” which means God is going to reveal major truth to Peter here. The word “trance” (εκστασις) means that God took Peter’s mind to an abnormal level to see this vision (*Ibid.*, p. 141). God supernaturally took Peter out of his normal mental state to let him see critical theology. This is not a dream nor is it an out of mind loss of mental control. He is in a very profound mental state of focused concentration. There are six vision realities he saw:

**Vision Reality #1** - Peter saw the sky open. **10:11a**

Peter is about to receive a culinary vision directly out of heaven.

**Vision Reality #2** - Peter saw something like a large sheet with four corners. **10:11b**

The four corners were held as it were by heaven and certainly implied things from the four corners of the earth: north, south, east and west. This was a vision of world wide dimensions. The grace of God would have a universal impact to all parts of the world.

**Vision Reality #3** - Peter saw all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds. **10:12**

There were undoubtedly some swine, probably an eagle or hawk or buzzard; there would be seagulls and reptiles and lobsters and all kinds of bugs. One commentator said this is a good metaphorical picture for the type of sinners God would save: swine, buzzards, snakes and birds.

**Vision Reality #4 - Peter heard a voice telling him to arise, kill and eat. 10:13**

Peter must have been kneeling while he was praying because God tells him to get up. The obvious point is you may select any animal you want and kill it and eat it. You do not have to consider whether the animal is classified as clean or unclean. You may take your pick. We may recall in Leviticus 11 and also in Deuteronomy 14:3-21 that there is a detailed list of clean and unclean things that people under the Law could and could not eat.

**This is the moment when God is showing Peter that the Mosaic Law has ended and the dispensation is Grace.** This is the moment that Peter learns that legal dietary matters are done. God tells Peter to kill and eat. It is interesting that the word “kill” (θῶ) is one that is used for an offering or sacrifice (Ibid., p. 211). By using this word, God is basically saying the grace sacrifice has been fully paid and you may eat any animal clean and unclean.

Apparently the Hindus and Buddhists have missed this point because they still regard it to be a sin to eat animal food of any kind, whether clean or unclean.

**Vision Reality #5 - Peter refuses and says he has never eaten anything unclean or unholy. 10:14**

Now Peter responds to God in a “vehement negation” (μηδαμῶς κυριε) which means “by no means Lord”, “not at all Lord”, “no Lord no” (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 290). Then he proceeds to tell the Lord that he has never eaten anything unclean and unholy. This is nothing but self-righteous, rigid, religious legalism that does not want to embrace grace.

There are many people who are stuck in a religious legal rut just like Peter, and they are afraid to embrace grace when it causes them to think in new ways or try something new. Let me see if I can stretch you a little and see how you respond.

Suppose we could prove that using grape juice at a communion service instead of real wine has never been the intention of God and that it lessens communion. Would you be open to something new? Peter wasn't.

Suppose we were to tell some Baptists that many of their views of leadership and baptism don't square with Grace Age apostolic teaching? Would they be open to something new? A couple of weeks ago a man told me he was a Baptist and I said why? He said because he felt Baptists lined up with his thinking. I said doesn't it seem odd to you that the greatest Bible expositors and theologians of the world that God used were not Baptists. Of course he immediately brought up Charles Spurgeon. Well having just read Arnold Dallimore's new book on Spurgeon I could point out that in October 1887 at the age of fifty-three, Mr. Spurgeon broke himself and his church away from the Baptists because of faulty doctrine (*Spurgeon A New Biography*, pp. 201-214). Just like Peter, “no Lord no.”

Suppose I were to prove to those who are stuck in a religious denomination that many of their customs or traditions are invented by men and don't square with God's Word. Do you think most would be open to something new? Most would respond like Peter, “no Lord no.”

God's Grace will force us to face religious prejudices that are wrong. God's Grace will challenge religious traditions and rules. It can be very theologically dangerous to say "I will not do this because I have never done this", or "I will not believe that because I have been taught different."

If the grace Scriptures teach something or set forth some pattern of action, then we need to do it whether or not we have ever believed it or done it before. Otherwise, you will stay in the same old rut and never go forward. That is exactly where Peter is at right here.

**Vision Reality #6** - Peter is told and shown three times that God has changed dietary restrictions. **10:15-16**

I do not think that it is a coincidence that God repeats this to Peter three times because Peter had denied the Lord three times, and Peter had confessed he loved the Lord three times. What this really comes down to is whether or not Peter is willing to believe God's Word that has revealed something new that goes against the grain of his religious thinking.

**Notice what we learn about grace in verse 15; things are clean by judicial declaration and cleansing of God.** God is no law breaker; God is a gracious grace cleanser. When you look at these verses and when you understand these verses, you must become a dispensationalist or you must deny the truth revealed here. From this point on, there is a major change in the program of God.

Now we might ask what in the world does this have to do with the saving of Gentiles. Well Jews would not even eat with Gentiles because they considered them to be unclean. So this is part of the process of revealing to the Apostle Peter that clean gentile food means Gentiles may also be clean by judicial cleansing of God.

**HEAVENLY LEADING #3** - God's Spirit informs Peter to go with Cornelius' men. **10:17-23**

As all of this was happening, three men show up looking for Peter and the Spirit of God revealed to Peter that he was to go with them. He went down and met them and they gave five messages to Peter:

**Message #1** - Cornelius is a centurion. **10:22a**

**Message #2** - Cornelius is a righteous and God-fearing man. **10:22b**

**Message #3** - Cornelius is well spoken of by the Jews. **10:22c**

**Message #4** - Cornelius was divinely led by God to send us to get you. **10:22d**

**Message #5** - Cornelius wants you to come to his house and preach a message. **10:22e**

By now it was late in the afternoon, so Peter invited them to stay the night and they would head out the next day. He was starting to learn to apply the grace of God to real life. He invites these Gentiles to spend the night with him and his host. God's Grace ministers to all people.

**Application:**

- 1) The cross of Jesus Christ puts an end to the Mosaic Law. Peter understood that and Paul will teach that (Colossians 2:14).
- 2) Even the best of men need to continue to grow and understand more of God's Word and God's Grace.
- 3) The Word of God needs to be our authority and not our opinions and religious ideas.

Someone wisely said "religious customs not based on biblical Grace Age truth is simply error grown old."

God's Word needs to be accurately understood. Too often we see it through the eyes of a denomination or teacher or minister. We need to see exactly what God's Word says and believe it and follow it.

- 4) You can have a great deal of religious training and not be saved. You can be devout and fear God; you can pray and give money and not be saved. Cornelius was a good religious man but he was not a saved man.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will experience God's Grace.