

Conversion to Jesus Christ:
(9) God's Preparation of the Sinner unto His Salvation (part 3)

In our study on conversion, for the past two Sundays we addressed the work of God in preparing the heirs of salvation for their conversion unto Jesus Christ. We saw how God in preparing the sinner for salvation makes known to him *his sin*, even *the sinfulness of his sin*. This is coupled with God bringing His elect to *an awareness of their helplessness* before Him leading them to understand that only through God's grace may they become saved. Now today we want to consider the instrument through which God does this work of reparation unto salvation, even *the gospel of Jesus Christ* as it is proclaimed to lost sinners. When God purposes to save a sinner from his sin, bringing that one into an eternal personal relationship with himself, He will cause the gospel of Jesus Christ to be brought to that one with view to his or her conversion. God has chosen to save His people through faith in the gospel, the message of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ.

Let us begin by reading a rather lengthy portion of Scripture--**Acts 10:1-48**.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ²a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius."

⁴And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?"

And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."

¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

¹⁵And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

¹⁷Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.

¹⁹And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them."

²¹And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?"

²²And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.

²⁴And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷And as he

talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

³⁰And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³So 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.”

³⁴So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.¹

The Book of Acts records the expansion of apostolic Christianity from its beginning place, in Jerusalem, to the environs of Judea and Samaria, and then into the Gentile world, even as far as the city of Rome, the capital of the empire. The beginning of Acts records this theme directly. We read in Acts 1:8 the last recorded words of our Lord to His disciples before He ascended into heaven: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This is a preview of the contents of Acts. Sometimes you will read an outline of Acts using this division, such as the following:

- I. The gospel proclaimed in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)
- II. The gospel proclaimed in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-9)
- III. The gospel proclaimed to the Roman/Gentile world (Acts 10-28)

Acts 10 records the beginning of the expansion of the gospel to the Gentile world. It required a major adjustment, even departure, of the Jewish apostles from the Jewish thinking and practice of the day. Not only would God prepare the Gentile Cornelius for his salvation, but God would prepare Jewish Peter so that he would take the gospel to this Gentile and his household. It would require a great vision and a word from

¹ Although this is the English Standard Version (ESV), I have set it forth in the paragraph divisions reflected in the New King James Version (NKJV). This is because I believe that, although a very good translation in many ways, one of the major weaknesses of the ESV is that it reflects wholly new standards for distinguishing paragraphs. It lumps conversations of different characters in a single paragraph. No one does this. When a speaker changes, a new paragraph begins. I believe that the ESV method is awkward and lends to the reading being less understandable than the standard practice, which is reflected above.

heaven to convince Peter to follow the course that would signal the great expansion of the Kingdom of God into the world.

Let us work through the major points of our passage.

I. God had chosen the Apostle Peter to be His initial spokesman to the Gentiles

Peter had been a rather narrow-minded Jewish nationalist, as were most devout Jewish men of the day. Peter was raised in Palestine, and was, therefore, even more convinced of the privilege and position of Jewish people over Gentile world than Jews who were born and raised outside of Palestine. These are commonly known as Hellenistic Jews, those who had been influenced and had adapted to a degree the thinking and the customs of the Roman world. The Palestinian Jews were more traditional and zealous for the traditions and practices of the rabbis than were the Jews born and raised outside of Judea. Even the existing synagogues were divided over this issue. There were many synagogues in and around Jerusalem. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote on behalf of the Romans, said that there were at least 480 synagogues in Jerusalem in the early first century. We read of this in Acts.

⁸And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then there arose some from what is called *the Synagogue of the Freedmen* (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. (Acts 6:8f).

This would have been a Jewish synagogue comprised mostly of Hellenistic Jews, those who had a broader view of what was accepted culture than the Palestinian Jews.

This distinction between Palestinian Jews and Hellenistic Jews continued in the newly formed churches of the Jews who had embraced Jesus as their Messiah. We read of differences and disagreement in the opening verses of Acts 6:1ff

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the *Hebrews* by the *Hellenists*, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. ²Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

⁵And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

⁷Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied (Acts 6:11-7)

Here, the "Hebrews" would have been Palestinian Christians. The "Hellenists" would have been Jewish Christians who were more broad culturally, having adopted many values of the Greco-Roman world. The differences that had separated them when they were only Jews, seemed to still separate them in a measure after they had become Jewish Christians.

Now Peter was a Palestinian Jew. He was, of course, from Galilee, and this region had a great deal of Gentile influence due to the trade routes through the region. Galilee was known as "the Galilee of the Gentiles." But Peter and the other apostles were, nevertheless, very narrowly Jewish in their belief that the Jews were a privileged, blessed people of the Lord and that the Gentiles were excluded from the blessing of God. And of course before the cross of Christ, while the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant was in force, Israel had that privileged status before God. But that had all changed. The purpose of God was that the Kingdom of God, now ruled over by the crucified but risen and enthroned Son of David, Jesus Christ, this Kingdom of God would expand into all the world, incorporating Gentile believers into the kingdom with equal standing as Jewish believers. The account that we have before us in Acts 10 is the working out of the purpose of God to begin to bring Gentiles into the churches.

Even though Peter had been of this very narrow persuasion, it is apparent that God had been at work in Peter to assume his role as the one through whom “the Gentiles hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7). We read in verse 6 of Acts 10 that Peter was “lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” A tanner was one who dealt with dead animals and their carcasses. No devout Jewish man would have “lodged there”, for it would have resulted in him becoming ceremonially unclean. And certainly Peter would not have lodged there in his earlier years. But here he was, staying in a house of a tanner. The Lord would send for Peter there to travel to the house of Cornelius and there proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ so that Cornelius and his household would be saved from their sin.

Later, when Peter recounted to the other apostles the events that transpired at the house of Cornelius, he related more detail than what we have read. There Peter makes direct reference to the proclamation of the gospel in order to bring about the salvation of Cornelius and his household. We read in **Acts 11:13** Peter recounting what Cornelius had told him.

“And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, ¹⁴*who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.*’” (Acts 11:13f)

And yet, before Peter would be willing to travel with Gentiles and enter a Gentile house, God would need to teach Peter a great lesson. Peter had this vision upon his housetop while in his daily prayer routine. It is as though God had prepared a great picnic feast for him. But upon this sheet were unclean foods that were never permitted to Jewish people, according to the Mosaic Law that had governed their lives. The command came to Peter, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

Peter refused. To look upon these things as food was objectionable to him. Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” The voice spoke again, “What God has made clean, do not call common”; that is, do not defile or reckon to be unclean that which God has regarded to be clean. The vision occurred three times, for this belief of distinguishing between clean and unclean foods was so engrained in the apostle’s thinking and practice.

Peter was perplexed. He thought to himself, “Now what in the world did that mean?” Thankfully the Holy Spirit spoke to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” (Acts 10:19f). Peter was now prepared to depart and to enter a Gentile’s home to tell them the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Let us consider...

II. Cornelius, a Gentile God-Fearer

Cornelius is introduced for us in the opening paragraph of Acts 10. He was a Gentile, a Roman soldier, even a centurion, which was a Roman officer who was over a band of soldiers about 100 strong. He was also a “devout man who feared God with all of his household.” He was a godly man, and would have his household, including his own family and servants, to be a godly household.

Now he was not a Gentile who had become a full Jewish proselyte. But he was a “God-fearer.” There were many like him--Gentiles, but who believed that the true God was the God of Israel. He was a praying man. He was a generous man. Here was a man who was not yet saved, but one whom the Lord purposed to save from his sins. He was a man whom God had prepared for salvation. He was mindful of who the true God was. He knew who the true people of God were. But before he would be saved from his sin, and even in order for that to occur, God would bring the gospel to him through the mouth of his Apostle Peter.

Here we see the normal way in which God brings salvation to His people. He would have one of His people bring the message of the gospel to a lost person or people, and God then brings salvation to those people by His grace operating through the gospel. Salvation is by God’s grace. But His saving grace is applied through faith. That faith must be placed in the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. That gospel must be proclaimed before the unsaved if they are to come to salvation. For they must

hear the gospel, for they must believe the gospel, in order to be saved from their sin. This is what we have set before us in Romans 10:11ff:

¹¹For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. ¹³For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

¹⁴How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:11-15)

And so, let us underscore this truth regarding God’s preparation of a sinner to come to salvation.

1. God’s instrument of salvation is the gospel of Jesus Christ

God has purposed to save His people through the gospel. And so we may read Paul’s words to the church at Corinth:

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, *but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* ¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

²⁰Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, *it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.*

²²For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:20-24)

The gospel humbles the pride of men, and men (i.e. men and women) do not like to be humbled, for they are proud in nature. The gospel strips people of their pride, telling them that they are sinners, guilty of sin before God, that they are deserving and are under God’s wrath, and that they have no ability or means to lift themselves out of their condition. The gospel declares that God alone must come in His grace to set them free and pardon them of their sin through Jesus Christ. Proud sinners do not like the message of the cross, that Jesus Christ crucified is the only way of salvation.

But it is God’s will and purpose to bless the human proclamation of His gospel in order to effect the salvation of His people. Paul made this statement affirming this reality:

¹⁴I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. ¹⁵So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” (Rom. 1:14-17)

Of course the word “gospel” itself literally means, “good news.” What is the nature and content of the good news and what is the nature of salvation it proclaims? This is a very important question. We have taught in the past that there is the common tendency among evangelicals--those who profess to believe and

practice the teaching of the Bible--to have narrowed their understanding than what the Scriptures teach regarding the nature and content of the gospel. We might say a few words about this.²

2. Defective views of the gospel

There are different and defective views of the definition of the gospel among those who profess to be Christian. For example, there are some who have reduced the meaning of the gospel to *the good news of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ*. In other words, well-intentioned Bible believers, with the best of intentions, believe the gospel is the good news of justification by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. As we affirmed very strongly in the past, justification is at the heart of the gospel. One cannot have a true, biblical gospel and be wrong on the teaching of justification. But to say that the gospel is equated with and restricted to the justification through faith alone is to reduce the gospel to a narrower definition than what the Bible teaches.

There are others, who take the matter a step farther, which I believe is a departure from the biblical gospel, in that they reduce the gospel to a mere message of forgiveness of sins through faith alone (justification), however, *they define saving faith as mere notional faith*, that is, saving faith is viewed as merely intellectual assent to the doctrine of justification through faith alone. They not only reduce the gospel to the message of justification through faith alone, but they empty faith of its essential biblical moorings, drifting into subtle but serious error respecting what constitutes saving faith. They teach that this kind of "believer", who "believes only", becomes justified through faith alone, but it is *through faith that is not evidenced in repentance from sin and obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord*.

But there is an even greater error than this that is common in evangelicalism, among those who claim to believe and follow only the teaching of the Bible as God's Word. There are those who have reduced the gospel to the teaching of faith in Jesus as a mere assent, as the error above, but the "forgiveness" they offer is not principally the forgiveness of God toward guilty sinners who lie under the wrath of God for having lived in defiance of and in transgression of God's law, *but rather their offer of "forgiveness" is a release or liberation from personal guilty feelings*, not actual guilt before God. The thought that they are in need of the atonement of sin before God, in order to be at peace with God, is not a problem for them, after all, "God loves everybody unconditionally." "But your real problem", they argue in agreement with most schools of psychology, "is the guilty feelings that you have within your conscience. You may solve this problem by "accepting Jesus as your personal Savior." In this way you may no longer feel guilty about yourself, but you may feel loved and accepted. This is not the gospel. And although the problem of guilty feelings is something the true gospel addresses and resolves, *the real problem is our actual guilt before a holy Creator God whom we have ignored and whose laws we have disregarded and transgressed all of our lives*. The true gospel addresses the greatest need of forgiveness of our sins before God Himself through the atoning sacrifice of His Son.

The Gospel is the good news that God brings His salvation from sin to people through faith in Jesus Christ. But biblical salvation involves more than deliverance from the penalty of sin (justification), but it also involves the deliverance from the alienation of sin (reconciliation and adoption), the ongoing salvation from the power of sin (sanctification), and the final salvation from the presence of sin (glorification). To reduce the gospel to a message that results in anything less than the full salvation that God sets forth in His Word is dangerous to souls and is weakening the churches of Jesus Christ.

To show how readily the concept of the gospel is reduced to a less than biblical understanding, consider another aspect of the gospel that is commonly ignored or largely unknown to our evangelical movement. An aspect of the biblical gospel that is commonly disregarded or inadvertently ignored is the role of the promised *kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ*, or as it is often expressed, *the kingdom of God*, in the gospel message. The gospel in the New Testament involves the good news that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Consider these verses:

² We addressed these matters in a sermon in July of 2012. But this is important and needs repeating, for there is much error and ignorance of this that some of us might assume is a given truth among evangelicals.

Matthew 4:23. “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

Matthew 9:35. “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction.”

Matthew 24:14. “And *this gospel of the kingdom* will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Acts 8:12. “But when they believed Philip as he preached **good news** (the gospel) **about the kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”

Acts 19:8. “And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about *the kingdom of God.*”

Acts 20:25. “And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about *proclaiming the kingdom* will see my face again.”

Acts 28:23. “When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, *testifying to the kingdom of God* and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.”

Acts 28:30f. “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹*proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ* with all boldness and without hindrance.”

Acts 13:32-39. “And we bring you *the good news* (the gospel) that what God promised to the fathers, ³³this He has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’ ³⁴And as for the fact that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken in this way, ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ ³⁵Therefore He says also in another psalm, ‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption.’ ³⁶For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷but He whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this Man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹and by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

Romans 1:1-4. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for *the gospel of God*, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³*concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh* ⁴*and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ our Lord...”

We see in these passages that either the gospel is directly associated with the kingdom of Jesus Christ or it is implied in the emphasis that the kingdom of God is given in the ministry of the apostles. In my opinion the best way to describe and define the gospel is as it is set forth by the apostle in Romans 1:9, in which he wrote of *the gospel of God's Son*. The gospel includes all of God's promises and blessings of salvation that are given to us and secured to us by Jesus Christ.

3. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

Now to return to Romans 1:16f, Paul wrote, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, *for it is the power of God for salvation...*” What Paul meant by this is that the gospel is the power of God that *results* in salvation. God is pleased to work powerfully through the gospel to save sinners.

We read in other places similar expressions of God's power in connection with the gospel. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For **the word of the cross** is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved **it is the power of God.**" God calls His chosen people to salvation by His power manifest in the proclamation of the gospel message.

A little farther in the 1 Corinthians passage we read: "**We preach Christ crucified**, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ **the power of God** and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23). And then later still, Paul wrote to them these words:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you **the testimony of God** with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵**that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.** (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Paul wrote of the power of God accompanying the gospel when he had proclaimed it in the city of Thessalonica. "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because **our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power** and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:4f).

God uses the preaching of the gospel to create new life in His people; this is a demonstration of mighty power. James wrote, "Of His (God's) own will He brought us forth **by the word of truth**, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (Jam. 1:18). And then Peter also wrote of the power of God working through the gospel to cause sinners to be born again unto new life in Jesus Christ.

²²Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³**having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever**, ²⁴because "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, ²⁵But the word of the LORD endures forever." Now this is the word, which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Pet. 1:22-24)

Paul declared that the gospel is the power of God to everyone who **believes**. The one who believes is the one in whom the power of God is manifest. Now, we should know with certainty and conviction that the power of God for salvation is not in **faith**, but it is in the **gospel**. Many in evangelicalism today promote a teaching that God's power resides in faith itself. Some heretics, those in the word-of-faith movement such as Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagan, teach that God Himself uses the power of faith to create and to work in His world. **The power is not in faith; the power is in the gospel that leads to and results in faith in the hearer.** We may see that this is the case in several places in the New Testament. Luke wrote in Acts of those who were assisted by the ministry of Apollos: "When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed" (Acts 18:27). God's grace enabled them to belief. Also in Acts Luke described Lydia,

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.** (Acts 16:14)

It was not her faith that resulted in her being changed; it was due to God opening her heart, that is, inclining her and enabling her to understand the message and to respond to the message of the gospel.

Now again, Paul declared that the gospel is the power of God to everyone who **believes**. The tense of the verb, "believes", is significant. Paul did not write that the gospel is the power of God to everyone **who at one time believed the gospel in the past**. Many believe saving faith is only a single act of faith in a one-time decision to "accept Christ." This is the emphasis that the error of **decisionism** has fostered on evangelicals for the last century and a half. People are told that if they but accept Jesus, and what is meant by that is a single act of faith, that this is saving faith. But everywhere in the New Testament **saving faith is the continuous act of believing that is presented and emphasized**. It is here. Paul wrote: "For I am not

ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who *believes...*” This is a present tense verb that describes the ongoing faith, *the continual believing of a true believer*. Again, this is everywhere taught. Even in **John 3:16** we read:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that *whoever believes* (not “believed”) *in him* should not perish but have eternal life.”

And **John 3:17** and **18**:

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who *believes in Him* is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

And **John 3:36**:

“He who *believes in the Son* has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

There are many professing Christians who are greatly troubled regarding their assurance of salvation because evangelists or pastors or books have pressured these people to recall whether or not they had truly “believed” rightly or truly years before, when they first heard the gospel. And especially those who believed at a young age are commonly unsettled because they doubt they had true or full or sufficient understanding of the gospel when they believed, and therefore they question if they had exercised saving faith. If I may be frank about this matter, it matters nothing what you believed 10 or 30 years ago, the promise of God is that “the power of God for salvation *to everyone who believes...*” The question you should ask yourself is this: “Do I believe the gospel today, even now?” “Am I believing the gospel today, does my life show forth my faith, does my speech and my attitudes and my values and my actions and my reactions demonstrate that I am believing the gospel?” If you are one who is believing, the power of God through the gospel is operative in you today. And to the degree that you live out today and tomorrow believing this gospel, you will see the power of God realized in your life to transform you into the child of God that God has destined for you to become.

Now let us return to our passage in which the conversion of Cornelius and his household is displayed before us.

III. The conversion of Cornelius

A. Peter’s initial encounter with Cornelius

We read that Peter made the journey from Joppa to Caesarea with several of his companions and the representatives of Cornelius. It was a distance of about 30 miles along the coast.

Cornelius was anticipating Peter’s arrival and so summoned his relatives and close friends. He was about to hear the way of salvation he desired that the ones he cared about most would also hear from Peter.

We read that when Peter came into the house of Cornelius, he host did something for which Peter corrected. We read in **verse 26**, “When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.”

But Peter would have none of that. **Verse 26** records, “But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” We then read of Peter’s encounter with the household.

²⁷And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but

God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

At first Peter seemed not to know precisely the purpose of the vision or the purpose of God summoning him. Cornelius explained to him what had precipitated his invitation.

³⁰And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³So 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.” (Acts 10:30-33)

Now this had been an angel that had appeared to Cornelius, although here he described him as a “man” “in bright clothing.” The angel spoke to Cornelius, but the angel did not give the gospel to Cornelius. The angel could have done so. But he did not. God would have Peter tell Cornelius, not the angel. This is God’s way. He would have the gospel of salvation told to others by those who have been recipients and beneficiaries of the gospel.

We see the same pattern in Acts 8 when the Lord sent Philip to preach the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch.

²⁶Now *an angel of the Lord* spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. ²⁷So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹Then *the Spirit* said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”

³⁰So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:26-30)

The angel could have spoken directly to the Eunuch, but the Holy Spirit would have Philip do so. It is God’s purpose to have the gospel proclaimed to people by people.

B. Peter’s words to Cornelius and his household

We read in **verse 34ff** the substance of his message to Cornelius.

³⁴So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

This is a good summary of the gospel, the good news of salvation from sin. Through faith in Jesus Christ a restored relationship with God may be experienced by helpless, guilty sinners. He is the Savior, He may be trusted to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. In faith we entrust our case to Him.

C. The response of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44-46)

⁴⁴While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

The manifestation of the Holy Spirit coming upon this household was proof that God had brought salvation to them. It was a miraculous event that occurred in conjunction with the proclamation of the gospel.

Now of course our charismatic friends argue that this speaking in tongues is that which they practice among themselves today. We would argue that this experience of Cornelius and his household was not a heavenly language or angelic language, or a prayer language, as they purport. Rather it was the miraculous ability that the Holy Spirit gave to this household to speak forth the wonderful works of God in foreign languages that they had not known previously. They were unknown tongues or languages to Cornelius and his household, but they were languages known and spoken by people in various parts of the Roman Empire.

That this is clearly the right understanding may be seen in the response of Peter's words in **verse 47**, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter was referring to Pentecost. On that occasion the "tongues" which the disciples spoke when the Holy Spirit came upon them were foreign languages. They were foreign languages on this occasion also. It was a sign gift to prove to Peter and the other Jewish Christians that God was now receiving equally Gentiles through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ being proclaimed to them.

The response of Peter was to baptize them that had believed. In **verse 48** we read of Peter's action: "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." This was an acknowledgment that they were full participant members of the household of God, the family of God, even along with Jewish believers everywhere.

Later when Peter returned to Jerusalem, and the news of what had occurred had reached the other Jewish Christians at Jerusalem, they challenged Peter for what he had done. We read in **Acts 11:1-3**,

Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. ²And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, ³saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

But Peter then rehearsed to them all that had transpired. He concluded with these words, "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

This convinced them. We read in Acts 11:18, "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.'"

What may we say as we consider the lessons and implications of these things?

1. Let us have the same concern that Cornelius had for our family and friends. Let us do what we can so that, too, will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can bring them salvation.
2. Let us attempt to be a "God-fearer" in all of our ways so that our family and friends may possibly desire and be willing to hear the gospel that has so impacted our lives.
3. Let us purpose to scatter the gospel as a farmer scatters his seed while waiting and watching for a harvest of souls. The more gospel seed we sow into hearts, the greater harvest we will see one day. Psalm

126:6, “He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

4. Let us be in prayer that the Lord would give us opportunity to make the gospel known to others. And then let us pray for wisdom and for courage to speak with others, making known to them the blessed gospel that we have come to embrace as the greatest news a person in this world could hear and receive.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20f)