

Acts Week 33

Cornelius, First Fruits of the Gentiles

1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, **2** a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. **3** About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius!”

4 And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, “What is it, lord?”

So he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. **5** Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. **6** He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.” **7** And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. **8** So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

This doesn't sound like a big deal, the man was a centurion and a devout man, who prayed. We wait to see what power God has given him but we fail to see it, it was not the power to perform miracles, that is not the issue here, it was Cornelius's faith, can the power of God in a man accomplish good without faith first? Peter had just performed miracles which caught the attention of many people, but here we find only a description of Cornelius's character. Awe, but there was a miracle we do not want to miss, a common miracle that is still taking place today, the miracle of the gift of the gift of faith. Cornelius acted on and was living out the faith God had given him.

People believed in the power of the Lord because they witnessed the miracles; John Stott pauses here to reflect on other miracles, he looks back upon Elijah and his seven miracles and Elisha's fifteen miracles. So what of them? Stott asks, what was the result of Peter's demonstration? We remember that Peter first restored Aeneas who had been paralyzed for eight years, then brought Tabitha back to life and so the news spread across the land. How do these fit into what we are currently reading? When we dig a bit deeper we find these miracles as those performed by Jesus, How? With Elijah and Elisha, it was the power of the miracles that supported the prophetic ministry of both men and so it is here with Peter and with Cornelius. While others may profess to have powers, even as Pharaoh's wizards performed tricks they were no match for what God accomplished through Moses and Aaron.

Now Peter steps up, what is the relationship, **1)** Both miracles of Peter followed the examples of Jesus, He brought people back to life, and **2)** the miracles were performed by the power of Jesus and not their own. This is something that many today claim to

have power but the true believer must remember we have no power on our own. Peter says, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you." Verse 34. 3) The signs performed ushered in the understanding of the signs of salvation by Jesus and 4) The miracles performed drew more people to Jesus for He is the Lord.

Still, how do these tie to Cornelius? We are looking at miracles, Stott asks, as we look at our verse, "What is the power in Cornelius's character?"¹ Is it not the work of the Holy Spirit? What made Cornelius a devout man, a giver to those in need, he prayed continually and his entire house believed. As we are looking at his entire house we can also see the effects on those around him, his servants, and another soldier. We see that God's character noticed the life and the prayers of Cornelius. Verse 4, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God." What greater honor can any believing servant of God seek to be recognized for?

This should be important to every believer, we do not go looking to impress God, not at all, we shall go humbly surrendered that His will may be done. It will never be what we can get done, it is always what He can get done through us. Cornelius understood this apparently with no instruction booklet, who other than the Spirit could have accomplished such a task in a man?

The debate over Cornelius' standing in the faith has been whether he was a proselyte or not. If he was, where did his learning come from? What Ceremonies did he take part in, was he circumcised, was he under the law? When we cannot identify that he was trained to be a proselyte or came about from another, then the safe assumption, having been told he was a devout man, gave alms, and prayed constantly, then it should be evident the Spirit was at work.

Our walk with God should never be said as "I am trying," it should be, "Father, here I am, send me." We need to merely step aside and be available. Our efforts will never accomplish a smidgeon of what God can get done in us and through us. With this in mind, we can look back to see the Spirit's hand at work in Cornelius. There is far more going on with Cornelius than just reading through the chapter. This man represents many believers today, but with the world so fast-paced many will not notice the Lord's calling, drawing them to our Christ Jesus.

Miracles are not always huge in scope, many go unnoticed in our confused world today, the first cry of a newborn baby, and the love and devotion of an elderly person who continues to place flowers on the grave of one no longer present. The healing power of God raises people every day from the hold of death to new life and promise. The simple writings we find of Cornelius describe the greatest miracle of all, God called, Cornelius believed and acted upon that calling. We see that the power of believing, *Pisteuō*, "to

¹ Stott John, Acts, Seeing the Spirit at Work, John Stott Bible Studies booklet. Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove Il. Page 39.

have faith (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing), i.e. credit; by implication, to entrust (especially one's spiritual well-being to Christ):—believe(-r), commit (to trust), put in trust with. in a moral or religious reference, used in the NT of the conviction and trust to which a man is impelled by a certain inner and higher prerogative and law of soul, to trust in Jesus or God as able to aid either in obtaining or in doing something: saving faith.”² To entrust your life in the hands of our mighty God.

When you greet a brother or sister in our Christ Jesus... practice doing so through the eyes of miracles, because that is exactly what you are witnessing.

Cornelius:

a centurion whose history is narrated in Acts 10. He was a "devout man," and like the centurion of Capernaum, believed in the God of Israel. His residence at Caesarea probably brought him into contact with Jews who communicated to him their expectations regarding the Messiah; and thus he was prepared to welcome the message Peter brought him. He became the first fruit of the Gentile world to Christ. He and his family were baptized and admitted into the Christian church (Act 10:1,44-48).

Significance of the Incident:

The exact importance of the incident depends upon the position of Cornelius before it occurred. Certainly he was not a proselyte of the sanctuary, circumcised, under the law, a member of the Jewish communion. This is abundantly evident from Ac 10:28,34,45; 11:3,18; 15:7,14. But was he not an inferior form of proselyte, later called "proselytes of the gate"? This question has been much debated and is still under discussion. Ramsay (St. Paul the Traveler, 43) says that the expression, "God-fearing," applied to him, is always used in Ac with reference to this kind of proselytes. Such were bound to observe certain regulations of purity, probably those, this author thinks, mentioned in Ac 15:29, and which stand in close relation to the principles laid down in Le 17-18 for the conduct of strangers dwelling among Israel. Renan, on the other hand, denies that Cornelius was a proselyte at all, but simply a devout Gentile who adopted some of the Jewish ideas and religious customs which did not involve a special profession. The importance of the whole transaction to the development of the church seems to depend on the circumstance that Cornelius was probably not a proselyte at all. Thus we regard Cornelius as literally the first-fruits of the Gentiles. The step here taken by Peter was therefore one of tremendous importance to the whole development of the church. The significance of the incident consists exactly in this, that under Divine direction, the first Gentile, not at all belonging to the old theocracy,

² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4100/nkjv/tr/0-1/>

becomes a Spirit-filled Christian, entering through the front door of the Christian church without first going through the narrow gate of Judaism. The incident settled forever the great, fundamental question as to the relations of Jew and Gentile in the church. The difficulties in the way of the complete triumph of Peter's view of the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the Kingdom of Christ were enormous. It would have been indeed little short of miraculous if the multitude of Christian Pharisees had not raised the question again and again. Did they not dog Paul's steps after the Council? Certainly Ramsay is wrong in saying that the case of Cornelius was passed over or condoned as exceptional, for it was used as a precedent by both Peter and James (Ac 15:7,14).

As for Peter's subsequent conduct at Antioch, no one who knows Peter need be surprised at it. The very accusation that Paul hurled at him was that for the moment he was carried into inconsistency with his principles (hupokrisis). Of course, this incident of Cornelius was only the first step in a long development; but the principle was forever settled. The rest in due time and proper order was sure to follow. By this tremendous innovation it was settled that Christianity was to be freed from the swaddling bands of Judaism and that the Christian church was not to be an appendix to the synagogue. The noble character of Cornelius was just fitted to abate, as far as possible, the prejudices of the Jewish Christians against what must have seemed to them a dangerous, if not awful, innovation.

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<https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?topic=ET0000905.HT0000605.IT0002330.NT0001236.BT0001060>