

CORNELIUS, PETER, AND THE PROVIDENTIAL PLAN OF GOD  
ACTS 10:1-23

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

One of the big news items this week was the selection of Zohran Momdani (PROJECTOR ON--- ZOHRAN MOMDANI) to be the Democratic candidate for mayor in New York City. He is generally regarded as being pretty far to the political left. He calls himself a democratic socialist.

There was another guy who claimed the same description who lived over a hundred years ago. He headed up a group called the Bolsheviks. They gained control of Russia in 1917. (VLADIMIR LENIN) In a 1905 letter Vladimir Lenin wrote, **"...to combat the religious fog... We founded our association, the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, precisely for such a struggle against every religious bamboozling of the workers."** (*Christian Post*, 9/23/2019)

When he died a few years later, Joseph Stalin (JOSEPH STALIN) emerged as the top leader of the country. In 1928 he initiated the first of the Five Year Plans. The goals of these plans were primarily economic in nature. But Stalin also began an effort to crush all religious institutions in the country. He vowed to wipe out Christianity in Russia within ten years. In the following decade thousands of Orthodox priests were killed. Protestant pastors were also imprisoned in Siberia and sometimes killed.

One scholar says that at the end of ten years Christianity was not wiped out. In reality the number of Christians in Russia had grown from about 100,000 to 1 million. The Russian Commissar for Education, a man by the name of Anatoly Luhacharsky, observed at the end of that period, **"Religion is like nail; the more you hit it, the deeper it goes in."** (*New Humanist*, January 2019) Christians looked at the developments of this period in Russian history and found evidence of the providential hand of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Historically, hard times for the church of Christ have often been good times for spiritual reproduction. In our own individual lives hard times also are opportunities for growth and for the advance of the gospel. In challenging times we have reason to be hopeful; for we have a sovereign God, and this sovereign God has a providential plan. In tough times, whether they involve persecution, the death of a mate, divorce, health problems, financial struggles, or wayward kids or grandkids, we can trust in the providence of God, because He has a plan for this world that is being worked out.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, the doctrinal guide for Presbyterians (PROJECTOR ON--- PROVIDENCE), defines "providence" as God's **"most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions."** This preserving and governing of God's creatures is clearly evident in the passage

before us this morning. Indeed we have seen the providential plan of God at work in this entire book. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus told His disciples to be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the rest of the world. That statement was both a command and a promise. We have seen this witness given to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Today we shall see it begin to reach the Gentiles. For if the rest of the world is going to be exposed to spiritual truth, the Jewish Christians will have to reach out to the Gentiles. We will look at how the providence of God is involved in pulling that off, and we will hopefully learn something about how we should respond to God's providential plan today.

I.

We begin, then, with vv. 1-8 of Acts #10 and a consideration of CORNELIUS AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN. (PROJECTOR ON--- CORNELIUS AND GOD'S SOVEREIGN PLAN) Last time we saw how the Lord was preparing Peter to be the key person for breaking through with the gospel to the Gentiles. Peter performed two miracles, which reaffirmed that He was an agent and representative of the God of heaven. The Lord was at work performing another miracle in Peter himself. Peter's attitude about what kinds of people could be acceptable to God was being changed. For we saw him staying in the home of a tanner, a person whose occupation was regarded by traditional Judaism as a "despised trade."

Our passage begins with the description of the preparation of the other key player in this breakthrough to the Gentiles. His importance is evidenced by the fact that Luke devotes 66 verses to a story that involves him. He is Cornelius, who is a Gentile. Cornelius is a centurion, which was an officer in the Roman army. (CENTURION 1)

The term "centurion" suggests that the officer who held this position commanded a hundred men, and many Bible teachers assume that to be the case. But in the first century there were normally only 80 men under a centurion's command, if his unit was at full strength. The basic unit of the army was the contubernium, which had eight men. Ten contubernia made a century.

The Roman army had two kinds of large military units. It had the legions and the auxiliaries. The Roman legions were composed of Roman citizens. They had the best equipment and the best training and the best pay. The auxiliaries were composed of non-citizens. Many of their troops came from the outer provinces of the Empire. They typically got half the pay of the legionnaires. But if they put in twenty years of service, and survived, they became Roman citizens, and qualified for other benefits.

This centurion was an auxiliary centurion. Verse 1 says that he was from the Italian cohort. This meant that his unit was originally organized in Italy with Romans who were not citizens. Over the years, however, it had probably acquired troops from other parts of the Empire. The top commander of this auxiliary would have been the provincial governor of Judea. Years earlier that was Pontius Pilate.

Centurions had to be tough. The Roman historian Polybius said, **“Centurions are required not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but when overwhelmed and hard pressed, to stand fast and die at their post.”**

Cornelius had a name that was common among the Romans. In 82 BC the Roman ruler Cornelius Sulla (CORNELIUS SULLA) freed 10,000 slaves. All of them chose to adopt the name Cornelius in his honor. This Cornelius might have been a descendant of one of these freed slaves. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 2 tells us that Cornelius was a devout man who feared God. Some Gentiles recognized the spiritual bankruptcy of the pagan religions and were attracted to the high ethical standards of the Jews and the single God whom they worshipped. To become a full Jewish convert meant that men had to be circumcised. That kept many males from fully converting. The God-fearers, as these Gentiles were called, had varying degrees of commitment to Jewish practices of Sabbath observance, prayers, dietary laws, and almsgiving. The author Luke notes that this Cornelius gave alms to Jewish people and prayed continually.

(PROJECTOR ON--- CAESAREA MAP) Cornelius was living at Caesarea, which was located on the coast about 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 30-35 miles north of Joppa, where Peter was staying. The town was named after Caesar Augustus. Herod the Great a couple of decades earlier had dredged the harbor, made a breakwater, and built a large palace right on the water. (ANCIENT CAESAREA) He also constructed a huge aqueduct to bring in fresh water, an amphitheater, a hippodrome. and a temple. The ruins of some of these structures are still visible today. .

Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea. Pontius Pilate had been based here, though he was no longer in office at the time of our story. So Cornelius was serving under the command of the governor. His troops would have been responsible to provide protection for the port and the aqueduct and the governor and to deal with any unrest that might arise in the province. (PROJECTOR OFF)

While Cornelius was praying about 3:00 one afternoon, which was the time of prayer for the Jews, he had a vision. According to v. 4 the angel told the centurion, **“Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”** Assuming that the centurion is not yet a true believer, does God hear or answer the prayers of unbelievers, of those who do not have saving faith in Him? It would seem that He does respond to those who are truly seeking Him.

But was the appearance of this angel in a vision due solely to wise choices of this centurion to pursue the true God of heaven? Was it the inherent goodness of this individual that merited God's favor? (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:44) Jesus said, **“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him...”** The Father was drawing this centurion. For he was part of God's sovereign and providential plan. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The angel continues his instruction in v. 5, **“And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.’ 7 When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.”**

This centurion responded promptly to these divine directions. God was providentially at work in drawing this guy to Himself. He had a key part to play in the Lord’s plans. There are unbelievers around us in whom the Lord may also be working. We need to be sensitive to that possibility so we can be instruments of God’s grace to them.

George Peters was born in 1909 in Russia. He came of age during the early part of the development of Communism in Russia. As a teen he became a member of the Communist Party Youth League. George was a bright kid. He was offered a college scholarship in his later teen years, during the time when Stalin was seeking to wipe out Christianity. In order to receive the scholarship and go to college he had to become a full member of the Communist Party. He was not a Christian, but he just did not feel right about becoming a full blown Communist. When I heard him explain his story, he confessed that he was not quite sure why he turned down the opportunity. It certainly meant that his career opportunities were going to be limited. But that refusal was part of the providential plan of God.

He and his family determined to go to Europe. They eventually managed to do that. George Peter’s real wish was to get to the US some day. He couldn’t get the papers to do that. So he went to Mexico. There he worked on a large plantation as a cowboy.

One day he got a notice from the post office that there was a parcel at the station waiting for him. He rarely got packages, and by foot it took a full day to get there and back. But when he had the chance, he headed off to collect his package. He got it, tore off the wrapping, and discovered that it was a Bible. George Peters was absolutely disgusted. He had wasted his entire day on a trip to get a religious book. He was going to simply toss the Bible away, when he noticed that there was a price tag in it that said \$16.95, which was a lot in that day. So he decided to keep it. Eventually he read it, and eventually he was converted to Christ as a result of reading that Bible.

Later George Peters moved to Canada, and then finally his wish to come to the United States was fulfilled. He went to college and graduate school. He became a missions leader and a seminary professor. I had Dr. Peters as a professor for one semester in graduate school. Even back in Russia the Lord had been providentially at work in this man’s life. The fact that the Lord may likewise be at work in the lives of unbelievers around us should affect the way that we relate to them. It should make us sensitive to opportunities to point them toward Christ.

II.

In vv. 9-16 we come to the subject of PETER AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PETER AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN) For God's plan to be accomplished Peter also must be changed. He has been changed to the point that he was willing to stay in the home of a tanner. He has been changed by his experience of seeing the Holy Spirit come upon the Samaritans who had turned to Jesus. But he has yet a bigger step to take in reaching the point of accepting the possibility that Gentiles could be fellow members of the body of Christ without also becoming Jewish proselytes. God is providentially going to see to it that this further change happens.

Peter was up on the tanner's roof praying shortly before the delegation from Cornelius arrived. The typical Jewish prayer times were in the earlier morning and in the afternoon. Usually the Jews ate their two meals at midmorning and late afternoon. For whatever reason Peter was praying at noon, and he was hungry. A meal was being prepared down below. But Peter was about to have a divine encounter. It was at noon that Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was noon when Philip had a divine appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch. Now it is noon when Peter has a vision from the Lord.

Peter fell into a trance, and beginning in v. 11 we read, **"... [he] saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat!'"**

Leviticus #11 contains a description and a list of the kinds of animals that the Jews could and could not eat. This dietary law was another means by which the Lord kept His people distinct from their surrounding neighbors. Some have also pointed out that there were health benefits that came from avoiding at least some of the animals on the unclean list. Now Peter in his vision sees all kinds of animals--- clean and unclean--- and a voice, apparently that of Jesus tells him to kill and eat.

Peter responds in v. 14, **"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."** The four gospels show that Peter and the other apostles had not been especially strict in observing the rabbinic traditions. But the dietary law concerning clean and unclean foods was not just a tradition of the rabbis. It was a central teaching of the Hebrew Bible. To go against this Biblical law was a very difficult thing for Peter to do. Although Peter was now a Christian, he was still a Jew. Earlier in the Book of Acts we saw that he was still going to the temple for prayer. Before the Sanhedrin he was arguing that these followers of Jesus were well within the realm of traditional Judaism. To break the dietary law would be to deny the Mosaic Law.

Peter had not yet comprehended the fact that the death of Christ upon the cross had rendered the Mosaic Law obsolete. Animal sacrifice was no longer necessary. Jesus had provided the final sacrifice for sin. Temple worship was no longer necessary. The need for a class of priests was eliminated. Dietary laws no longer applied. Peter didn't quite grasp all of this. So a second time this voice told him that these unclean animals were now cleansed. Then it happened a third time.

The number “three” had special significance for Peter. Three times he had denied that he knew Jesus. Three times Jesus had asked Peter if he loved Him. Three times Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep. Now three times the Lord Jesus was telling him to eat these animals that were formerly unclean. Was Peter going to say “no” three times? To say “No, Lord” was the same as saying that Jesus really was not his Lord.

A central part of God’s providential plan for this world is bringing unbelievers into a right relationship with Jesus. Jesus commanded the disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and in the rest of the world. In order to reach the ends of the earth, the Jewish Christians had to reach out to the Gentiles. That was a difficult thing for these first Christians to do. But God was providentially at work in the life of the unbeliever Cornelius. He was also providentially at work in the life of the believer and apostle Peter. For the Lord had determined that Peter was going to be the one to make the breakthrough among the Gentiles.

The story about the conversion of the missions professor Dr. Peters involved God’s providential working in the life of an unbeliever. But there was a Christian who was also involved in God’s providential plan for Dr. Peters. Somehow the story about the flight of this family from Russia to Mexico had made it into the newspapers. Mention had been made of the fact that George Peters was working on a plantation in Mexico. There was a Christian farmer in Oklahoma who happened to read that newspaper article. He was impressed by that story and the Lord seemed to give him the idea to send George Peters a Bible. He didn’t have much of an address to work with. But when the farmer sent it to George Peters in this small town in Mexico, it got to him. Sending that Bible played a key part in George Peter’s conversion to Christ.

You see, we Christians play a part in God’s providential plan to bring the gospel to unbelievers. Our responsibility is to be aware of opportunities to share the gospel with unbelievers whom the Lord is preparing to hear it. Like that Oklahoma farmer, like the Apostle Peter, we need to be faithful witnesses.

### III.

In vv. 17-23 we come to THE PROVIDENTIAL MEETING OF CORNELIUS AND PETER. (III. THE PROVIDENTIAL MEETING...) The Lord’s objective with Peter was not just to get him to understand that eating unkosher meat was now permissible. The more important goal was to have Peter realize that Gentiles were no more unclean than Jews and that believing Gentiles could be equal members of the church of Christ. Eating unclean food was one thing in the eyes of the Jews that made Gentiles unclean. The Lord addressed that issue in Peter’s vision. But the arrival of unclean Gentiles shortly afterward showed that the issue was broader than food.

Verse 17 says that Peter was perplexed about the meaning of this vision from God. As he was thinking about it, the three men from Cornelius showed up looking for Peter. This was no coincidence. The timing of their arrival was part of the providential plan of

God. The Lord wanted Peter to see that there was a broader application to the lesson he had just been taught in his vision.

Somehow, we are not told exactly how, the Holy Spirit told Peter that the men from Cornelius were downstairs looking for him. There is a textual problem in v. 19 about the number of men who were downstairs. There is considerable variation among the early copies of the New Testament at this point. Some make no reference to the number of men. Some say that there were three men. Some make reference to two men, the explanation for that being that the guard was also along but the two servants were actually the representatives of Cornelius. We don't know with certainty what Luke originally wrote.

So Peter went downstairs and asked why these guys had come looking for him. In v. 22 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.”**

The providential nature of this meeting now became evident to Peter. He had just had a vision in which probably Jesus Himself told him that the old distinction between the clean and the unclean had been removed. Immediately after that three Gentiles show up claiming that their master just had a vision in which an angel told him to seek out Peter in Joppa. Peter knew that this was more than just a coincidence. It was divine timing. It was the providence of God.

As we look back at the founding of our nation on this Independence Day weekend, we can find many evidences of the providential care of God. Many of our founders were godly men, and even when they may not truly have been Christians, they had respect for the God of the Bible. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (JOHN ADAMS THOMAS JEFFERSON) were the second and third presidents of our country. They had earlier been sent to Europe on diplomatic missions and became close friends. They spent several months touring England together.

Back in the states they became political opponents. But after their government service their friendship was restored. They maintained an active correspondence when they retired to Virginia and Massachusetts. One of the divine ironies is that they died on the same day, just a few hours apart. The further irony, or providence, is that the day on which they died was July 4. The further divine coincidence was that it was the year 1826, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Biographer David McCullough describes what happened after the passing of John Adams: “As those present would remember ever after, there was a final clap of thunder that shook the house; the rain stopped and the last sun of the day broke through dark, low hanging clouds--- ‘bursting forth... with uncommon splendor at the moment of his exit... with a sky beautiful and grand beyond description,’ John Marston would write to John Quincy.” (McCullough, *John Adams*, p. 647)

IV.

So what should be OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN? (IV. OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S...) God is sovereign. He will accomplish His purposes. What does this mean for us? It means we should be obedient to His revealed plan.

God's plan to reach the Gentiles was sure to be accomplished. He had decreed it to happen. He was providentially at work to see that it would happen. He was at work in the life of the unbeliever Cornelius. He gave him a vision that would result in him being hooked up with Peter. The Lord also was at work on Peter. Peter, too, was the recipient of a vision. God told him to accept that which the Hebrew Bible had declared to be unclean. Peter's responsibility was to obey.

He did. But it was tough at first. Peter's initial response was: "By no means, Lord." "No, Lord." That is an interesting response, isn't it? No, Lord? Charles Spurgeon, the famous British preacher of the 1800s commented, **"This is an odd jumble of self-will and reverence, of pride and humility, of contradiction and devotion."** If Jesus is Lord, how can one say "no" to Him? If we say "no," how can we call Him "Lord?"

When God reveals his providential plan to us, we need to respond with obedience. If we don't, we miss out on blessing, and sometimes He makes us obey anyway. Such was the case with the Old Testament prophet Jonah, who didn't want to go to Nineveh. The Lord had to use a big fish to get him back on track. Sometimes the Lord uses other people to accomplish His plan, and we just miss out on blessing and on eternal reward.

The natural question that follows is: How can I know God's providential plan for my life? The Lord doesn't always reveal Himself in such miraculous ways as He did with Peter and Cornelius. Occasionally He does that. But I suspect that the majority of us have never had that kind of encounter. So I would suggest that instead of waiting for such experiences that may never come that we focus on God's revealed will. The Lord has already revealed His basic plan in the Bible.

If we focus on living according to the Bible, using our gifts and abilities, exercising wisdom and taking advantage of the opportunities that come across our paths, we won't have to worry about being out of God's will. It is harder to get out of God's will than we might be inclined to think that it is. If we are obeying His revealed word in the Bible, we won't ever have to worry very much about being out of God's will. If we are genuinely committed to Him, He will direct our paths.

In my second year in college I was assigned a freshman roommate named Mike. Mike was a nice enough fellow. I invited Mike to some of the Christian activities and meetings in which I was involved. He wasn't interested. He went to mass regularly, but he did not buy the idea of needing to personally accept Christ as his Savior. We got along fine, but the next year we both got different roommates. I felt like I could have done a much better job of pointing him to Jesus. We didn't keep in touch after college.



One night fifteen years later I got a call from Mike. He got my number from a mutual friend. It turned out that Mike had become an evangelical Christian. He wanted to let me know that the year that he had me as a roommate had an influential part in him becoming a Christian. I appreciated that call a lot. I had not done anything especially brilliant, or sacrificial, or loving in being a roommate to Mike. I had regrets at the time that I had not been more effective as a witness. But simply living a Christian life had a positive effect.

We have focused this morning on God's providence in relation to His plan for bringing the gospel to the entire world because that is the focus of our passage. That is also a chief concern of our Lord. He wants the witness for Christ to be brought to the whole world. But we need to be reminded that God's providence also involves care for each one of us who know Him, who have welcomed Jesus into our lives. We as individuals have a part in His plan, and we are important to Him.

A woman by the name of Diana Severance who has a Ph.D. in history from Rice University tells about an incident that happened during a big reunion of former Civil War soldiers. The meeting included men from both the Union and Confederate armies. One Confederate at the meeting reminisced about how he had once been sent to pick off an exposed Union sentry. As he aimed his gun at the sentry, he heard him singing the hymn *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*. The southerner didn't care if the guard was an enemy soldier or not. He just couldn't shoot him. At that moment an old Union soldier stood up at the meeting and asked if that incident had happened in the Atlanta Campaign of 1864. It had. The old Union man said he was that sentry. He told how he had been depressed and fearful when assigned to this isolated guard post and had begun to sing the hymn to keep his spirits up, never realizing until that moment that it had saved his life. (Christianity.com, 4/28/2010) The providence of God had been at work. Some day when we get to heaven, we may likewise be amazed to find out about how the providence of God was caring for us.

I would like for us to close by reading the two verses of the hymn of that Union soldier, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*. It is a hymn that Charles Wesley composed a hundred years even before his time. This is how it goes:

**Jesus, lover of my soul,  
Let me to Thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high.  
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,  
Till the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide;  
Oh, receive my soul at last.  
Other refuge have I none,  
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;  
Leave, ah! leave me not alone,  
Still support and comfort me.**

**All my trust on Thee is stayed,  
All my help from Thee I bring;  
Cover my defenseless head  
With the shadow of Thy wing.**