

Introduction

- Much like Acts 9 which details the conversion of Saul, this passage is another critical one in Acts
- It serves as the transition point when the Gospel extends out to the Gentiles

A. The Lord responds to Cornelius's devotion (10:1-8)

1. Luke introduces us to a gentile named Cornelius (READ 10:1-2):
 - a. He lived in Caesarea:
 - 1) Caesarea was located along the Mediterranean coast and served as the regional capital for Rome
 - 2) It was a military headquarters and is where the Roman prefect lived (a governor of sorts over all Israel)
 - 3) According to Josephus, the town was inhabited almost entirely by gentiles, many of whom were likely military figures
 - 4) In Acts 9 we learned that Phillip ultimately makes his way to Caesarea and settles there for the remainder of his life (likely not until after this)
 - 5) Paul was also kept as a prisoner there for two years before being sent to Rome
 - b. He was a centurion:
 - 1) The Roman military was broken down into legions (6000 men), then cohorts (600 men), and then units (100 men).
 - 2) As a centurion, Cornelius would have been responsible for commanding one of the 100-men units
 - 3) This would have given him a certain amount of social status or importance in the region
 - c. But, the most significant thing about Cornelius was that he was devoted to God: Luke says he was a **"devout man"** (meaning he was deeply religious) and provides three evidences of his devotion:
 - 1) He **"feared God with all his household"**:
 - a) Fearing God in the Bible is a euphemism for honest and genuine devotion
 - b) Notice that Cornelius' devotion was something shared by his entire household
 - 2) He **"gave alms to the [Jewish] people"**—this really stands out because alms were acts of charity (the giving of money, food, clothing, etc.) and it was uncommon for Roman soldiers to show such sympathy to the Jews
 - 3) He **"prayed to God continually"** (it appears in this context that he may have followed the Jewish pattern of praying three times a day: sunrise, 3pm, nightfall)
 - 4) One thing was lacking, however—Cornelius did not know Jesus, but all of that was about to change
2. While Cornelius is engaged in his regular afternoon prayer time, an angel appears to him in a vision with both some encouragement and some instructions (10:3-8):
 - a. The encouragement is that his prayers and charitable deeds to God's people have **"ascended as a memorial before God"** (READ 10:3-4):

- 1) The purpose of a memorial is to remember someone or something
 - 2) In the OT, when the grain offering and showbread offerings were brought to the priests, they were required to take a small portion of the grain and burn it before the Lord as a “soothing aroma” in something referred to as the memorial portion (Leviticus 2:12; the rest of the offering was for them to consume)
 - 3) This memorial portion was intended to cause them to remember God—whether it be His presence, His purpose, His provision
 - 4) This gives us a good picture of the motives behind Cornelius’ prayers and charitable acts and how the Lord viewed them—he did them as a means of honoring and remembering God and the Lord accepted them as an offering
- b. The angel then instructs Cornelius to send some men to Joppa to fetch Peter (READ 10:5-8):
- 1) Luke records more of the conversation Cornelius had with the angel two other verses
 - 2) The first is later in v. 33 where we learn that the angel told Cornelius the purpose of Peter’s visit—so Cornelius could hear from Peter all that Peter had been commanded by the Lord
 - 3) We get an even clearer picture in 11:14 where we learn that the angel told Cornelius that Peter would specifically speak to him words by which he could be saved (e.g. the Gospel)
3. Take away:
- a. One take away is that religious devotion, praying, and charitable giving aren’t enough to save anyone:
 - 1) Cornelius had all these, but still lacked one thing—Jesus
 - 2) Jesus said, **“he who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”** (John 3:36)
 - 3) 1 John 5:12 states, **“He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”**
 - 4) When it comes to salvation, it’s that simple—if you have Jesus, you have eternal life; if you don’t, you don’t
 - 5) This was true of Cornelius—in spite of his love and devotion to God, and all his praying and gift giving, he still needed to call upon the name of Jesus to be saved
 - b. This leads to our second take away which is that God responds to anyone who genuinely seeks Him:
 - a. Cornelius was a gentile, which made him an outsider—a group of people whom Paul describes in Ephesians 2:11-14 as excluded from commonwealth (citizenship) of Israel, strangers to the Biblical covenants, void of hope and without God
 - b. Yet, the Lord not only saw his devotion, heard his prayers, and was pleased with his offerings, but He responded to Cornelius’s genuine desire to know and honor Him
 - c. This sounds similar to what Jesus did with the Canaanite woman who approached him in Matthew 15:21-28 (READ)
 - d. In Cornelius’s case, the Lord honored his desire to know Him by sending Peter to preach the Gospel to him so that he could be saved

B. The Lord challenges Peter’s religious convictions and prepares him to take the Gospel to gentiles (10:9-23)

1. The first challenge is philosophical and theological: the Lord reveals to Peter that he should not call something unclean which He has declared clean (READ 9-16):
 - a. Peter is praying when he becomes hungry and falls into a trance and experiences a divine vision
 - b. In the vision, he sees a large sheet lowered to the ground from heaven and it's filled with all kinds of **"four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air"**:
 - 1) Based on Peter's response, we know that these were what the Law refers to as unclean animals or those which the Israelites were forbidden to eat
 - 2) The food laws are described in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, but unclean animals included things like pigs, horses, reptiles, birds of prey, fish without fins and scales, certain insects, etc.
 - 3) Not only were Israelites forbidden from eating such things, but they would defile themselves by simply touching them
 - 4) While it's popular in some Christian circles to suggest that God outlawed certain foods because they were unhealthy, the primary purpose was to teach the Israelites about holiness and to do so God simply declared some foods holy and some profane
 - 5) So, what Peter sees before him is a smorgasbord of forbidden food, and regardless of how hungry he is, the Law prohibited him from eating it
 - c. What happens next is completely unexpected by Peter and he responds as we would expect any good, God-fearing, Law-biding Jew to respond:
 - 1) The Lord commands him to **"kill (e.g. sacrifice) and eat"** (15)
 - 2) Peter refuses, and does so emphatically: **"By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean."** (14)
 - 3) The Lord responds by informing Peter that He has **"cleansed"** what was formerly unclean and Peter is no longer to consider such things **"unholy"** (15)
 - 4) This dialog between Peter and the Lord was repeated two more times which suggests two things:
 - a) Peter's difficulty in comprehending and accepting what the Lord was teaching Him
 - b) The importance of what the Lord was doing
2. The second challenge is practical: The Lord reveals to Peter that He is sending him on a mission into what Peter believed to be unclean territory and unclean people (READ 17-20):
 - a. We see that Peter didn't quite know what to make of the vision he had:
 - 1) Luke describes Peter as **"greatly perplexed"** by it meaning he was confused, at a loss
 - 2) The verb is in the imperfect tense indicating the ongoing nature of the confusion
 - 3) In fact, it's not until Peter meets Cornelius that he finally figures out what the Lord was trying to teach him (v. 28)
 - b. While he is still trying to figure it out, the men arrive and the Lord tells Peter to go with them back to Caesarea:
 - 1) The Lord tells him to do it **"without misgivings"** which is an interesting statement
 - a) The word the Spirit uses here is *diakrino* which has a verity of uses in the Bible
 - b) At its root it means to make a judgment about something based on careful and detailed information
 - c) When used in a positive sense it refers using discernment

- d) However, it's also used in a negative sense to refer to having doubt, or even disputing something (e.g. it's used in Jude 1:9 of Michael the archangel disputing with the devil over the body of Moses)
 - e) A negative sense is clearly indicated here which means the Spirit was either telling Peter to accompany the men without doubt or concern, or telling him to go without disputing (the latter may be more probable considering Peter's disputing the Lord's command in the vision to eat)
- 2) Why would Peter have doubts, or possibly even debate or argue with God, about going with the men?
 - a) The answer is found later in v. 28 (READ)
 - b) To be clear, the Old Testament Law did not specifically prohibit association with or visiting foreigners (e.g. gentiles)
 - c) Rather, it was the oral law and Jewish traditions that prohibited associating with gentiles; it was believed that since gentiles didn't observe the food and purity laws of the OT, they were unclean and therefore merely associating with them would render one unclean
 - d) So, Peter's concern with accompanying these men was that he himself would become defiled or unclean
- 3) The Lord's assurance to Peter that it was okay to go with the men is that He Himself had sent the men to him (notice the double emphasis, **"I...Myself"**)
- c. Peter obeys the Lord and invites the men to lodge with him for the night before embarking on the journey the next day (READ 21-23):
 - 1) Up to this point, all Peter knows is that he is supposed to go back with the men, but the Lord hasn't told him why
 - 2) However, he learns about the angel who visited Cornelius and ultimately the purpose for which he is to go to Caesarea: to deliver a message to the household of Cornelius
 - 3) Luke doesn't reveal to us the moment at which things start to click with Peter but the fact that he invites the men, gentiles, in to lodge with him for the night suggests that he might have started to understand the point of the vision (he clearly understands by v. 28)
- 3. Take away:
 - a. One take away is that sometimes our convictions don't always align with God's commands
 - 1) Peter was brought up to believe that gentiles were unclean and needed to be avoided
 - 2) But, as we learned, this wasn't based on God's Law, but rather Jewish religious tradition
 - 3) This begs the question, How much of what we believe or practice is based on God's Word vs. our religious traditions?
 - 4) Does any of it prevent us from seeing God's purpose and plan, or stand in the way of us accomplishing what He has called us to do?
 - 5) What might he need to challenge or confront us on (like he did Peter)?
- 4. Another take away is that God's redemptive plan always included us gentiles, but He planned to do it through Israel:

- a. We see this in His promise to Abraham (Genesis 22:17): **“I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”**
- b. Paul repeats this in Galatians 3:8: **“The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’”**
- c. We see this played out in Acts where God first established His church among the Jews in Jerusalem before expanding into Judea and Samaria and ultimately into the land of the gentiles
- d. As Paul wrote to the gentiles in Ephesus, **“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off (e.g. us gentiles) have been brought near by the blood of Christ”** (Ephesians 2:13) and **“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household”** (Ephesians 2:19)