

## **The Mystery Revealed (Cornelius)**

Acts 10:1-8, 17-23, 30-33

The book of Acts is a history book. The author, Luke, is a careful and accurate historian. And that's important, because there are many people who choose to doubt the historical reality of much of what he writes, especially the description of the miracles and the supernatural power of God. But it is all history. It all took place, in time and place, in history. And we have studied the historical figures to whom we are introduced. Peter assumes prominence after Pentecost. And then Stephen, and Philip. And now, beginning with chapter 9, Saul is introduced. He would be renamed as Paul, the apostle Paul. This morning we meet Cornelius.

But this book is more than history. It is the history of redemption—that is to say, the history of God's personal intervention into the world he created in order to accomplish all that was necessary for the salvation of his people. Thus these historical events are all very purposeful. They have meaning and the events themselves are the revelation of God's eternal purpose for that salvation.

In that context, chapter 10 is one of the most important chapters of the whole book. R.C. Sproul puts it this way, "Acts 10 is one of the most important chapters of the entire book of Acts, if not the most important chapter. Actually, it is one of the most important chapters in the entire New Testament because it brings to our attention an extremely important moment in redemptive history, a time of transition from the old way of doing things to a whole new epoch of God's redemptive activity."

That might not jump out at you when you first read these words, but I want to stress that idea of transition—transition from

the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, to the new. Not that the gospel has changed, for it hasn't. But the administration of gospel has changed; the outward expression of it. The best summary of that transition is the reality that in the past, before Jesus came in the flesh, God worked with and through the singular nation of Israel. The nation of Israel was the nation of God's people. But now, in the New Testament, the gospel is "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek," Romans 1:16. Paul would describe that transition as the mystery revealed. In Colossians 1, Paul writes of

Col. 1:26 "...the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. 27 To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

That's the mystery. That is what was hidden, not yet revealed, in the Old Testament. That is what "has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints." The gospel is for all the nations—that's the revelation of the mystery. The Gentiles, all the nations, every nation, the whole world, would be part of the church of Jesus Christ. The New Testament church is, therefore, universal. That is the mystery which is now revealed.

And that transition is made known through the vision that God gave to Peter, the vision of all the animals about which God said, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." We will study that actual vision next time, in two weeks, as next week Danny Olinger will be preaching with reference to Reformation Day. But that vision represents this great transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. That vision defines, by example, the mystery which is now revealed. And today, this morning, we will set the stage for that

great revelation of the mystery with the person of Cornelius.

As I thought about my sermon title for today, I couldn't decide whether to emphasize the historical nature of our text, by reference to Cornelius, or to emphasize the theological nature of this great mystery now revealed. So I put both things in my title, because as we study the historical figure of Cornelius today, I want to keep our focus upon what comes ahead. And that is why I have chosen three separate passages from Acts 10, each one focused upon the person of Cornelius. Next time we'll focus on the verses I am skipping today, focused upon the actual vision which Peter received. So, Cornelius.

v.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."

A centurion identifies a non-commissioned military officer in charge of 100 soldiers. His Roman name indicates that he was most likely a Roman citizen. He had a large house and many servants, so he was apparently rather prosperous. And the word used to describe Cornelius is very significant.

## **I. A DEVOUT MAN.**

The Greek word, I believe, is the most comprehensive description of true faith and devotion to God. It is often very well translated godly or refers to personal godliness. In the past perhaps understood as pious. Devout, of course, is a good translation. The reference is to sincere faithfulness to God, not merely an outward show of religion, a deep sense of reverence and honor to God. It is a very positive term. And that was Cornelius, with Luke's specific reference to,

### **A. The fear of God.**

Fear in the sense of honor and reverence. That description is repeated in,

v.22 And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews."

There does seem to be a specific identification of a group we could call "God fearers" in the book of Acts. There are certainly three other groups identified—the Jews, the Gentiles, typically referring to all the people of all the nations who didn't believe in Israel's God, and then the Samaritans, that half-breed group typically despised by the Jews. But then there are frequently mentioned Greek speaking Gentiles who understood and believed most all of the Jewish religion, but did not submit to circumcision and were, therefore, not officially numbered as Jews. But they believed much, and the identification is a positive one. Again, to quote Sproul, "They were called God fearers because, even though they were Gentiles, they did not believe in the gods and goddesses of Rome, or in the pantheon of Greek deities, or in any of the Oriental religions of the day. Rather, they believed in the Most High God and were faithful followers of Yahweh, the God of Israel."

Cornelius would have belonged to that group. He was a devout man who feared God. And we then see his,

## **B. Active devotion to God.**

Again, there is nothing here to imply that he was a hypocrite, just pretending outwardly to be faithful to God while inwardly cherishing his own sin. Instead, the description of his good works is positive, it is a description of genuine good deeds done for God's approval and blessing. We read in verse 2 that he "gave alms generously to the people." Generously, not merely for show. And with a more general description of his devotion to God, we

read in verse 22 of...

v.22 “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews”

A just man, upright, God fearing, and with a good reputation among the Jews, no doubt because of his good works of giving alms generously. With all of that, is the recognition of,

### **C. A reputation for sincerity.**

He lived among the Jews, and had earned their respect. He had gained “a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews,” “well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.”

Again, my emphasis, that all of this is a positive evaluation of this godly, devout man. And he was a man demonstrating...

### **D. A commitment to personal prayer.**

Again, no suggestion of insincerity or hypocrisy. No suggestion of praying just for the show, just for the attention, just to make himself look good in the eyes of others. None of that is suggested here. Instead we read in verse 2 that he “prayed continually to God.” Later, in...

v.30 “So Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house.”

The earliest manuscripts do not have the reference to fasting, as that was likely added to manuscripts later with an ordinary and understandable connection to prayer. The emphasis is upon the prayer. Personal prayer. Devotion to prayer, “always” according to verse 2, even the time is specified, the ninth hour or 3 pm.

Going back to verse 3, you can see just how personal this time of prayer was. It wasn't just routine. It wasn't just a prescription or a formula which Cornelius rattled off without

thinking. It was personal communication. And God spoke to him as well!

v.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.

Again, everything there speaks of the sincerity of prayer as it ought to be. And in this time of transition, the Lord himself even appeared to Cornelius in a vision of an angel, something Cornelius could see with his eyes and hear with his ears. He understood. And he responded with fear, here even the sense of fright or terror, a different Greek word than the one which described his as fearing God. This appearance was startling, and without a specific verbal revelation from God, the terror would have been appropriate. And so God spoke, through the angel, and Cornelius understood with whom he was speaking.

v.4 “And 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.”

God heard his prayers. God remembered his prayers. And answered his prayers. This was a believer talking to his God, and God responded. But having said all of that, I need to emphasize what was missing with Cornelius. In order to more fully set the stage for Peter's vision and the transition to the New Covenant, let me say that Cornelius would be representative of an Old Covenant believer. In other words, his faith was not deficient in its essential nature. He is presented as believing truly and earnestly what he believed. But he believed only in so much as he learned from Old Testament Jews prior to Jesus' incarnation. He believed...as much had been revealed in the Old Covenant. So the deficiency in his faith was not something

lacking personally, not something lacking in his soul, but something lacking in his understanding. He did not yet understand the transition from the Old to the New Covenant. He did not yet understand the central promise of the Old Covenant, the Messiah, was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. He didn't understand yet that what he lacked was the full revelation of the mystery, namely that although he was a Greek speaking Gentile, he didn't need to become a Jew to become a follower of the true God. He only needed Jesus. He full understood and believed the Old Testament revelation of God in covenant relationship to his people, and thus he is the perfect instrument to represent this transition from the Old to the New Covenant which Peter would embody.

In other words, he was...

#### **E. A man of Old Testament faith.**

He wasn't a Jew. He wasn't circumcised. He wasn't a citizen of the nation of Israel. But he was recognized by them for his faith and his life.

v.22 And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews..."

Let's look ahead just a little bit to see that this means. This is how Peter explained the transition to the New Covenant.

v.34 "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. 36 The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all."

In other words, the gospel is for any nation. Every nation. God shows no partiality. What matters is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but what Paul writes in,

Gal. 5:6 "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love."

And Peter would end that great sermon in Acts 9 with this reference to the Old Testament prophets,

v.43 "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

Again, trying to make this point clear, Cornelius represents those who lived in the midst of this great transition from the Old Covenant to the New. And we will see further examples of other such men in the chapters that follow, but going back to our text in Acts 9, we see that Cornelius is...

## **II. AN INSTRUMENT APPOINTED BY GOD.**

I didn't want to skip over this, which is why we will study the actual vision to Peter in the next sermon. Luke gives us a very specific emphasis that I am seeking to recognize. Luke is emphasizing that God has ordained all of this, all these circumstances and all these people. Including the role he assigned to Cornelius. It was,

### **A. A divinely ordained task.**

God ordained it. God decreed it. God predestined it. And so he told Cornelius exactly what to do.

v.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."

Don't forget what we already looked at in verse 4. God said to

Cornelius, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.” We don’t know exactly what Cornelius prayed, but this was the Lord’s answer. Cornelius would be the instrument by which the Apostle Paul would be brought into the church with the revelation of this mystery of the gospel now proclaimed to the whole world.

We gain an additional explanation in,  
v.17 “Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon’s house, and stood before the gate. 18 And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. 19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you. 20 Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.” 21 Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, “Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?” 22 And they said, “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.” 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.”

God is accomplishing his purpose, bringing everything to pass according to the counsel of his own will, and goes so far as to give Cornelius,

#### **B. A personal, divine revelation.**

v.30 “So Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, 31 and said, ‘Cornelius,

your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.”

Clearly this was a supernatural appearance of God, much more common in the Old Testament experience of God among his people. For it was then, before Christ, when we read of,

Heb. 1:1 “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets...”

Yet now, with the fullness of the transition to the New Covenant completed, we read the very next verse that God...

Heb. 1:2 “...has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

So this appearance to Cornelius was a significant part of that transition from the past to “these last days,” for now, God has “spoken to us by His Son.” For Cornelius, it was “a man [who] stood before me in bright clothing.” It was “a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, Cornelius!” It was God, speaking to his people. And as a final thought about Cornelius, let me emphasize Luke’s description of,

#### **C. A willingness to obey in submission to God’s word.**

Cornelius was a faithful servant, used by God to say this to Peter,

v.33 “So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”

That's where we will end this morning, anticipating what comes next, which will be God's revelation of the mystery of the gospel.

Col. 1:26 "...the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. 27 To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

And Peter, of course, would understand completely. So we read ahead,

v.34 "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. 36 The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all."

That is the same word which I preach to you today.

Rom 1:16 "For 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. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

And this is that gospel,

Rom. 10:9 "...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."