

Acts 10:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Acts chapter 10 verses 1 to 23. At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, Cornelius. 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. And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. And 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.

And having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and wanted something to eat. But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance, and saw the heavens opened, and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.

And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once into heaven. Now 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, and called him out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was lodging there.

And while Peter was pondering the vision, the spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise, and go down, and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them. And Peter went down to the men and said, I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?

[2:14] And 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. So 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.

In Acts chapter 10 we arrive at the great transition in the book of Acts, as the gospel starts to move to the Gentiles. Although we have already had some intimation of this move, as the gospel is received by the Ethiopian eunuch back in chapter 8, here in Acts chapter 10 it is Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his household that are the key converts marking this shift in the history of the people of God.

As a centurion, as part of a larger cohort, Cornelius would have been in charge of about 100 men, one of six within the cohort, that would have been part of a legion of about 6,000.

Caesarea was an important site of Roman administration within the land of Palestine. It was where the Roman prefect lived, and it was also an important harbour. The reader of the book of Acts, who is familiar with Luke's gospel, might recall at this point the centurion in chapter 7, who was commended for his great faith. Here Cornelius is described as a devout God-fearer. He fears God with all of his household, he gives generously, and he is committed to prayer. It is worth bearing in mind at this point, that conversions in the book of Acts are often not from unbelief to faith, rather they are from an old covenant faith to a new covenant faith, from a situation of a God-fearer in this case, to the situation of a Christian. A similar thing seems to occur in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch.

We might also recognise that with the three great conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and now Cornelius of Caesarea, we have representatives of all three families of humanity, Ham, Shem, and Japheth. The character of Cornelius might also remind us of someone like Naaman the Syrian, another foreign military commander, who comes to believe in the God of Israel through the ministry of Elisha. Cornelius is praying around the ninth hour of the day.

[4 : 23] This is the hour of prayer and the offering of incense in the temple, and the angel who appears to Cornelius at this point speaks of his arms and his prayers ascending as a memorial before God.

There might be some suggestion here that his prayers and his arms are functioning as if they were sacrifices and offerings of incense. We see such a way of thinking about prayer in places like Psalm 141 verse 2, Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

Also in the story of Daniel in chapter 9, when the angel Gabriel appears to him around the time of the evening sacrifice, when he's been praying, even though the temple is not in operation at the time.

The angel who appears to Cornelius assures him that his prayers and his arms have been heard by the Lord, perhaps in a way that might remind us of the story of Zechariah back in Luke chapter 1, when the angel Gabriel appears to him. The angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter, who is staying with Simon at Tanna. Cornelius is not told why he should summon Peter, and this is a theme that goes throughout the story. People have only part of the picture.

Cornelius receives a vision, Peter receives a vision, and they need the two of them to come together to understand what the Lord is doing. The Lord is matchmaking two people, a Gentile and a Jew, and bringing them together in an act of mutual recognition. They should both see the work that the Lord is doing. This might also help us to understand why the events are so often repeated within this story. We hear of the initial vision of Cornelius as it is narrated by Luke, then as it is shared by the messengers to Peter, then as Cornelius tells it to Peter, and then as Peter tells it to the people in Jerusalem. Why all of this repetition? First of all, probably because it's emphasizing the Lord's initiative in the action. The Lord has done something, and people are reporting and responding to that thing that the Lord has done. But also because the transmission of this information is very important. It's important that mutual recognition occurs. God is bringing people together, and their appreciation that the Lord has worked on both of their sides to bring them together is much of the point of the story. The Lord is matchmaking Jews and Gentiles in one new body of the church. As the messengers of Cornelius approach Joppa to meet Peter, Peter has a vision of his own while he is in prayer in the middle of the day. A great sheet descends from heaven with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air, and he is instructed to rise, kill, and eat. This happens three times, and each time he resists it, insisting that he will not eat what is common or unclean.

[6 : 58] As the vision ends, Peter's confused. He doesn't understand what it means. But then the messengers of Cornelius arrive, and he is instructed to rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation.

Perhaps we should see some similarity between this rise, kill, and eat, and this rise and go down and accompany them. The meaning of Peter's vision is not easy to discern. What might be the connection between eating these unclean foods and accompanying these men to see a Gentile? I think that the answer is probably found in the recognition that animals represent persons. The dietary requirements in places like Deuteronomy chapter 14 are associated with the fact that Israel bears the name of the Lord. They've been set apart as holy. The dietary requirements are designed to mark out Jews from Gentiles. Peter's vision then is, among other things, a sign that this division between Jews and Gentiles is no longer operative in the same way. In Christ, the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. God has called the unclean animals clean. He has made them part of his household.

Like the domesticated and herbivore animals that Israel could eat, the wild beasts of the Gentiles will also be tamed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and will be included or consumed into the body of Christ. A number of commentators note the similarities between this story and the story of Ananias being sent to Saul. In both cases, two unlikely people are brought together in an important act of recognition. In both cases, prayer and visions are very important. And in both cases, an important change of perspective has to occur. Peter has to change his perspective on Cornelius and other

such Gentiles, and Ananias has to change his mind towards Saul. Both have initial reservations that have to be overcome. Peter has his reservations about associating with Gentiles, and Ananias has reservations arising from Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church. In both cases, we also see the power of the Holy Spirit in orchestrating these events. The Holy Spirit is the one that is ultimately building the church, and he is moving people around from place to place, bringing them in contact with each other, and through these meetings and acts of mutual recognition, helping them to see that the hand of the

Lord is at work. James Bajan, Peter Lighthouse, and others have also noted the themes of this story that connect it with the story of Jonah. In both cases, something rises up to heaven from Gentiles, bringing them to the attention of the Lord. In the case of the story of Jonah, it's the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. In this story, it's the arms and the prayers of Cornelius. In both cases, the prophet of the Lord is found in Joppa. They are sent to Gentiles. There is hesitation in both cases. There is a repetition of the number three in both cases. And then, of course, there is the sheet that might remind us of a sail. Here, the fisherman Peter is sent to cities by the sea, where he will start to fulfill his calling as a fisher of man, starting to bring in people for the Lord from the sea of the Gentiles.

Where the prophet Jonah was a reluctant prophet, Peter will prove faithful and will welcome the mission that the Lord has given to him. A question to consider. Why is it that Gentiles as Gentiles could not be full members of the people of God in the old covenant, but now can? What accounts for the change?