



“The Conversion of Cornelius”
‘Jesus Saves’ Series
Kevin Presley

Our series in **the Book of Acts** that we’ve entitled *Jesus Saves* brings us today to **Acts 10** and what was a pivotal moment in the development of the church and the revelation of God’s eternal plan for the world. As we’ve followed the apostles and evangelists from place to place thus far, we’ve found them focused on the Jewish people. Beginning on the Day of Pentecost, the gospel was first preached to the nation of Israel, just as Jesus and later, His apostles, said. The promised remnant of Israel are those who gladly heard and received the Christ when the gospel was first preached to them. But the Lord taught that after this initial offering of salvation to the Jews, He would then turn to the Gentiles. Remember that Paul said that the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first and then unto the Greek (**Romans 1:16**). That is to say, all other nations. This was God’s plan all along.

Here in **Acts 10**, we find a few things happening that had been promised by the Old Testament prophets and then by Christ Himself. First, the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, as Joel had prophesied and Peter had preached. In other words, the Gentiles would become partakers of the confirming work of the Holy Spirit in the early church. Second, Gentiles would be allowed to enter the long-promised kingdom of Christ. Third, Peter would continue to do what Jesus said he would do when Christ’s church was established: he would, for a second time now, use the keys of the kingdom given to him to open the gate of the kingdom to a new and much larger segment of humanity. All of these things occur here in this chapter, and none of them happened by accident. They were carefully orchestrated by God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit to make known to all people for all time that all who fear God and do His will can be accepted of God—saved, in other words, on the terms of the gospel. That the gospel is available to all and all can be saved through the efficacious work of Jesus Christ.

So, bear in mind that this is what’s happening in **Acts 10** and God has a specific purpose for unfolding these events when and how He did. We won’t have time to read the entire account, which spans

chapter 10 and much of chapter 11, but I strongly encourage you to take the time to read those two chapters. For our reading today, we'll begin in **Acts 10:1**.

Acts 10:1-6 "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" 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. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.""

As we read these conversion accounts, we cannot help but see the providential hand of God. God had the right people in the right places at the right times for these things to come to pass as they did, and for His purposes to be unfolded and displayed. This is certainly the case with the conversion of this man named Cornelius. Introducing Gentiles into the kingdom would be no small task. For millennia, the Jews had an exclusive covenant with God, which by its very nature and scope excluded the Gentile people, every other nation of the earth. Now, all along, God planned to use the Jewish people to bring salvation to the entire world--not only for themselves, but for the Gentiles as well. God's purpose was to use His chosen people, the Jews, to lead other nations to faith in God through Jesus Christ. But the Jews of Jesus' day missed many of the prophecies and truths of their own scriptures and they failed to understand that Christ had come to break down the wall of partition between themselves and the Gentiles. Therefore, even the Jews who were converted to Christ and who made up the Church viewed the Church as a Jewish institution. Their prejudices and perceptions of the Gentiles persisted even after they became disciples of Christ. But Christ established the Church in view of making Jews and Gentiles alike members of it and there was to be no distinction made between the two. But how were the Jewish Christians to be convinced of all this?

This is what the events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius were all about. Some claim that what happened to Cornelius is proof that the Holy Spirit falls upon people today in some miraculous way as evidence of their salvation. Even more claim that it proves that Cornelius and his household were saved before being baptized in water. But is that what these events tell us?

First, we once again see God's providence involved in the process of bringing a person to the point of conversion. God desires for all people to be saved (**II Peter 3:9**), but in this case, He had a special purpose for arranging events so that this man, Cornelius, would be the first Gentile to receive the gospel and be admitted into the kingdom. You see, God chose a Gentile for this role who was already held in high esteem by the Jews. Listen to how the Bible describes this man:

Acts 10:1-2 "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always."

Consider the moral character of this man. Most Jews looked upon Gentiles as godless pagans, and many of them certainly were. But here is a man who was different. Oddly enough, he was a man respected by the Roman government, and doubtlessly, by the Jewish people as well. He was honorable and trustworthy enough to be given a rank of high command in the Roman army. He was a centurion, which means he had 100 soldiers under his charge. That was no small thing. The common Roman soldier was

typically a heathen, blood-thirsty man, but Cornelius their captain was different. Somewhere along the way, this heathen man had come to reject the idolatry of the Romans and had come to believe in the one true God of Israel.

Cornelius didn't have the law, the history, or the pedigree, but he had a simple and devout belief that God exists and that He is the one true God that should be worshipped. Perhaps while on patrol one dark, starry night, he looked up into the heavens and saw the stars twinkling and shining like diamonds against the black velvet of the night sky and came to see that there was a Creator behind all of that. Add to that, his charge was the city of Caesarea where he beheld the life and the manner of the Jews as they worshipped and lived for God. And somewhere in the course of time, there was a change in both the thinking and the lifestyle of this man. He became pious and began trying to live a moral and holy life. He gave alms to the Jewish people in need.

So, how should we classify Cornelius? Well, he was what was called *a Gentile of the gate*. He wasn't a proselyte because Jewish proselytes were full converts to Judaism, including the rite of circumcision. The record clearly shows in **Acts 11:2-3** that Cornelius and his house were uncircumcised. So, he was rather a Gentile of the gate, which refers to a Gentile who comes to enough faith in the God of Israel that he begins to conform to the lifestyles and habits of the Jews, and who seeks after the one true God, short of actually being circumcised and becoming a convert to Judaism itself.

So, that's who Cornelius was. He was seeking after God. He was devout in his religious life. He was a spiritually-minded husband and father who raised his household up to serve God. He was generous, benevolent, and caring and spent much time in prayer. To tell you the truth, the moral and religious character of Cornelius far exceeds what we sometimes see in many professing Christians today—many who are looked at as in good standing. But here's the reality: Cornelius was lost. And may that be a warning to you today if you are basing your salvation on all of the good you do, all of the piety you show, all of the feelings and intentions you have, all of the religious ritual in which you engage. Cornelius had all of that too, but he was lost.

But what a wonderful candidate he was to hear the gospel! That's why God had His eye on Cornelius and orchestrated these events as He did. Cornelius was a man that the Jewish church could not level accusations of immorality against or ascribe nefarious motives to. All had to admit that Cornelius was an upright and sincere man who wanted to please God. It's a shame that many people today who live clean lives, do good unto others, are kind and loving, and are very sincere in their religion are going to be lost in the Day of Judgment because they haven't obeyed the gospel. But that's the very condition Cornelius would've been in had Peter not come and preached the gospel to him and his house.

Well, God sets these events in motion when, one afternoon, Cornelius receives a vision—not a dream at night, but a clear vision in the midday—as an angel of God appears to him.

Acts 10:3-6 "About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" 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. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."

I want you to notice a few things here just like we noticed with Saul last week. First, he is praying, but he wasn't saved. Why? Because the angel makes it clear that if he sent for Peter, Peter would tell him what

to do to be saved. So, here's a praying man who's lost. Second, notice that the angel didn't tell Cornelius that he was saved, nor did the angel tell him what to do to be saved. He simply instructed him to send for Peter, who was in a nearby town, to come and tell him what he must do. Angels aren't in the gospel-preaching business and they never have been. God used the angels, as the Holy Spirit was guiding the apostles and evangelists of the first century to bring the inspired man in contact with the uninspired man--the man who had the gospel by inspiration with the man who had no way of learning the gospel except he come in contact with a man who was inspired by the gospel. Therefore, salvation doesn't come in the form of an experience, a vision, a voice, a feeling. There is something that one must hear, believe, and do in order to receive the remission of sins. Please remember that as we go through our study.

Meanwhile, Peter is having a vision of his own. Cornelius dispatches some men the next day to go find Peter, and as they're on their way, Peter goes up on the rooftop of Simon's house to pray. He sees this strange vision occur three times. God wants to get a point across to Peter that he will not question. He sees a sheet let down from heaven with all manner of creatures on it--some forbidden by the law of Moses for a Jew to consume.

Acts 10:12-15 "In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common.""

What's that all about? It meant that in Christ, the restriction of the law of Moses had now been lifted. But there was a deeper connection to be made by Peter, and it finally occurs to him when these men that Cornelius has sent come knocking at the door and telling him of their mission. The Holy Spirit confirms to Peter their claims. He now realizes that what God has told him in this vision was that he was to no longer make a distinction between Jew and Gentile. So, the next day they set out for Caesarea and Cornelius's house. I really like **verse 24**.

Acts 10:24 "And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends."

Here's a man who is not only eager to hear the Word of God; he wanted his friends and kin folk to hear the Word of God, too. That's a wonderful window into the heart of this man, that he was not only interested in learning the truth, but he cared enough about his friends that he wanted them to hear it, too. Do you encourage YOUR friends to listen to the gospel? Do you give them opportunities and invite them to go with you when you know the gospel is being preached? Do you invite them to watch programs like this one or to read gospel literature or listen to radio programs that will point them to the Word of God? Cornelius was eager to not only be saved himself, but he wanted others to be saved with him. So, Peter finds an eagerly waiting audience when he arrives to tell Cornelius what he must do. Peter begins to preach, and he begins with this truth newly revealed to him for people in every nation-- Jew and Gentile.

Acts 10:34-35 "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

So much for the idea that all one must do is believe in your mind or in your heart. Those who are accepted by God are *those who fear Him and work righteousness*, the scripture says. You see, the gospel is not only facts to be believed; it also contains commandments to obey, as we shall see here. Peter proceeds to tell them of the life, ministry, and mission of Jesus culminating in his atoning crucifixion and His vindicating resurrection, and says that Christ had now commanded he and the other apostles to preach this message to the people, and whomever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.

Acts 10:43 "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

We'll come back to that in just a moment. But just as Peter says these things, his sermon is interrupted by an incredible event.

Acts 10:44 "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word."

Notice that he has not yet commanded them to do anything, which is what the angel said that he would do when he came. He hasn't instructed them to do a thing. In fact, in the next chapter, when Peter later rehearses these happenings to the Jews back in Judea, he says this:

Acts 11:15 "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning."

He had only just begun with the things he had come to tell them. Notice *the Holy Spirit fell upon them*. Peter did not lay hands on them as he did the people in Samaria in **Acts 8**. They didn't even pray or ask for the Holy Spirit to be imparted to them as some claim to do and are encouraged to do today. You don't read that here either. Suddenly, the Spirit just fell upon them. This is exactly the manner in which the Spirit fell upon the apostles on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**. It was a baptism in the Holy Spirit. I know people talk about the baptism of the Holy Spirit as though it happens to anybody who is saved, as if it's a common thing that happens every time a person comes to Christ. That a person should expect it or pray for it or hope for it after they become a Christian. That's not what the Bible teaches about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this here in **Acts 10** is the second of only two times recorded in the New Testament where anything of the sort took place.

Peter would say in the next chapter that when the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his house that he was reminded of the Lord's promise that they would be baptized or overwhelmed by the Spirit. Peter says it was evident that what was happening there was the like gift of what the apostles received on the Day of Pentecost.

Acts 11:16-17 "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

He doesn't recount all the other times people have been saved since Pentecost; he goes all the way back to Pentecost. And it's remarkable. The people here are astonished by what they see because now they're seeing the same thing occur that happened all the way back in the beginning when the apostles received the Holy Spirit.

Acts 10:45 “And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.”

So, why was the household of Cornelius such a special case that they would receive the same type of manifestation of the Spirit’s power as the apostles, and only they? What was so unique about them in this situation? Well, why did the apostles receive the miraculous power from heaven to speak with other tongues or languages? If you remember our sermon from a few weeks ago about the Day of Pentecost, we pointed out that this gift was a kingdom sign. In **Acts 2**, with the apostles, it was a one-time sign to fulfill prophecy and show that the kingdom of Christ had now come to the Jews. Remember, the tongues were a Jewish sign. It was to the Jews that the gift of tongues had significance. So, now, a few years later in Caesarea, the same type of experience occurs with Cornelius, the first Gentile convert to Christ. Just like in **Acts 2**, this was a kingdom sign to the Jews. This time, it was to show the Jews that the kingdom had also now come to the Gentiles.

Acts 11:18 “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.””

That’s what this was all about. It was not a sign that Cornelius had been saved because he had not yet been saved. Neither is it a modern sign of anybody else’s salvation today. It occurred on this unique occasion to demonstrate for all time that Gentiles could be received into the kingdom on the same exact terms of the gospel as the Jews, and that is through faith in Christ and obedience to the gospel. God had removed all distinction between the two. Notice the reaction beginning in verse 45.

Acts 10:45-47 “And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?””

Now we’re talking about water baptism. Peter says now that this has been confirmed, now that we’ve seen that Gentiles can be admitted into the kingdom, who can forbid them from coming into the kingdom? Just as Peter and the apostles had received the Holy Spirit, so had they, so who could forbid them to enter the kingdom? That’s what Peter is saying.

Acts 10:48 “And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.”

There it is. This one-time miraculous sign proves to the Church for all time that the Gentiles could be partakers of the salvation that Christ brought. And once that was proven to these Jewish brethren, Peter says that it cannot be forbidden of them to be baptized in water. Just like we entered the kingdom, so now they can enter the kingdom. Consequently, by being baptized into Christ is how one is saved by the blood of Christ and enters into the kingdom, according to Jesus.

John 3:3-5 “Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.””

Remember, Cornelius wanted to be saved. The angel told him that Peter would come and tell him what he must do. So, Peter comes. He preaches the crucified and risen Christ to them. And once all understand that Gentiles can now be saved, Peter does what the angel says he would do: he tells Cornelius and his house what they must do. He commands them to be baptized in water in the name of the Lord. And that's what any sinner today who believes and repents must do as well.

Peter uses the expression *the remission or forgiveness of sins* in verse 43.

Acts 10:43 **“To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”**

Remember what Peter also preached on the Day of Pentecost?

Acts 2:38 **“Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”**

Those people wanted to be saved, and Peter commanded them to do something attached to the remission of sins. You see, believing in the Lord means more than just some assent in our mind or heart. It means acting upon what the Lord has commanded you to do. And the fact that Cornelius was immediately commanded to be baptized upon his faith shows this to be the case.

My dear friend, listen: if you would be saved like Cornelius was saved, you must believe what he believed. That's the gospel of Christ. And all of the miraculous events that accompanied and led up to his conversion were simply to pave the way to bring Peter to his house and to convince all that Peter had the divine right to preach to these Gentile people and that Gentiles could now be saved and enter the kingdom. That's what all of the miraculous and extraordinary events had to do with. But once all of that was done, it boiled down to the same thing that is the case with every single man, woman, boy, or girl who would be saved, then or now: he had to hear who Jesus is, what Jesus has done, how Jesus came to save, and he had to respond to that message in faith in Jesus by obeying the commands of Jesus. If you would be saved like Cornelius, you must believe what he believed and do what he did, and that is, to be baptized in water by the authority of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you're like Cornelius today. You're a devout person, a God-fearing person. A pious, family-oriented person who tries to instill spirituality and morality into your family. You're a generous, benevolent, kind, caring, compassionate person. All of that is wonderful, but you're not saved without Jesus and obedience to His gospel. If you've not obeyed the gospel, won't you today?

©2020 BibleWay Media. All rights reserved.
BibleWay Media grants permission to copy this material for personal use. Permission is also granted to distribute this transcript as long as it is reproduced in its entirety, used solely for its original purpose of spreading the gospel, and attribution is given to the author and Let the Bible Speak.