

HOW GOD PREPARES PEOPLE FOR THE GOSPEL

ACTS 10

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The conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 provides every serious student of the Word further insight into the way that God works in people's lives to bring them to Himself—first, by preparing their hearts to receive the Gospel and secondly, by preparing the hearts of His people to give it. It also shows how He brings the two together and how He conveys and confirms the Gospel message. In short, it presents another magnificent example of His wonderful work of salvation.

Acts 10 is a pivotal chapter in the unfolding drama that characterized the early Church. First, it represents the fulfillment of the Lord's words to Peter when He stated in Matt. 16 that to him would be given the "keys of the kingdom heaven". This statement did not refer to some mysterious power or ritual but rather to the simple fact that through his witness Peter would be the first to open the door of faith to both Jew and Gentile. This occurred with Israel at Pentecost in Acts 2 and with the Gentiles here in Acts 10. In effect, the Lord used Peter to broaden the river of grace to all men. Further, this chapter also demonstrates the power and extent of the Gospel. Cornelius' conversion was the third in a line of three prominent conversions extending back to Acts 8. Each conversion represents salvation through three different means to three different people groups originating from the sons of Noah. The first was an Ethiopian eunuch who came from the line of Ham, progenitor of the black race. He came to the Lord through *personal* means, the result of the faithful witness of Philip the evangelist. The second was Saul of Tarsus who came from the line of Shem (Acts 9). He came to the Lord through *providential* means, being struck down on the road to Damascus, apparently without any human instrumentality. The third was Cornelius, a white man from the line of Japheth. He came to know the Savior through Peter's *preaching* of the Word. Taken together, they remind us that the Gospel is for *all* people; that we have been commissioned to go into *all* the world and preach the Gospel to *all* nations through a variety of means. Truly, the Gospel is for any who will receive it. But what makes this passage extremely practical is the way that it demonstrates the way that God works through His Spirit in the preparation and proclamation of the good news of Christ.

HOW GOD PREPARES THE HEART OF THE SINNER (VV. 1-8)

A centurion of great authority, Cornelius enjoyed a good reputation among the nation of the Jews (v. 22), quite an anomaly considering he worked for the much-despised Roman army. Eight noble qualities characterized this military man (vv. 2, 22), who is described as a devout person who feared God, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. From all appearances, he would appear to be a true believer, having repudiated the false gods of his nation. But according to Acts 11:14, when Peter was recounting the events that led to Cornelius's salvation, he quoted the words of the angel who said that Cornelius would "hear the words by which he and his household *will* be saved". In other words, as good and moral as he was, Cornelius still needed to be saved, a good point to keep in mind when witnessing to "nice people". Those whom we *think* are believers may not be, even though we think so! They need the Lord Jesus just as much and because they do, God who is rich in mercy works in their lives even *before* their salvation, just as He did with Cornelius. With Cornelius' this work came through an angel who instructed him to send for Peter who was in Joppa. God was privately working in the heart of Cornelius a sinner to prepare him to receive the Gospel.

HOW GOD PREPARES THE HEART OF THE HIS SERVANT (VV. 9-16)

But while God was privately working in the life of Cornelius to receive the Gospel, He was also privately working in the heart of His servant to present it. While praying at noon in the house of Simon the tanner, Peter saw a vision of a great white sheet coming down from heaven filled with both clean and unclean animals (vv. 10-11). A voice came out of heaven instructing Peter to kill and eat. Despite Peter's vehement objections, the voice repeated the instruction two more times before the sheet was taken back into heaven. What a disturbing picture it must have been to Peter whose personal convictions were being challenged by the Lord. God was beginning to break down Peter's personal prejudices in preparation for him to take the Gospel beyond his own people--as God may need to do at times with His people. Perhaps He began that process with Peter with a *visit* to the house of Simon the tanner, a person who was in the trade of working with the skins of dead animals, totally abhorrent to any God-fearing Jew. Now He was further preparing Peter with a *vision* that was equally abhorrent. What it did accomplish was to set the stage for the events that would soon take place to help Peter understand that He was bringing together both Jew and Gentile into one new thing—the Church—made up of every type of sinner whom God would cleanse through the blood of Christ. Those sinners ranged from the “domesticated” animals and high-flying birds of the air, right down to the wild beasts and “creeping things” that our world is filled with today. The fact that God had to speak three times to Peter should remind us also that we may need to change our attitude toward those outside our comfort zone. Without question, this event was the means by which God was “softening up” his servant to realign his thinking and prepare him for his divinely-appointed encounter with Cornelius.

HOW GOD BRINGS THE TWO TOGETHER (VV. 17-33)

While wondering what this vision meant, the servants sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. Had they arrived earlier, Peter might not have been as prepared as he was. Had they arrived later, the impact of the vision might have waned. God's timing is always perfect! Hearing the request to go to Cornelius, Peter left the next day for Caesarea along with some of his brethren. What a sight it must have been as Jews and Gentiles traveled together in harmony, another precursor of things to come. How unlike Jonah who centuries before from the same place, Joppa fled from the presence of the Lord, unwilling to bring God's message to a despised nation! But such is the work of grace in the life of a believer when the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5). Arriving at Caesarea, the apostle found many gathered together awaiting his much-anticipated visit. It was evidence of the extent of Cornelius' popularity among family and friends and a reminder of the vast spiritual potential that awaits every witnessing opportunity. Declaring that they were present “to hear all things that are commanded thee by God” (v. 33), their hearts were fertile ground for the Gospel seed. Oh, that every audience where the Gospel is preached was so inclined!

HOW GOD CONVEYS THE MESSAGE (VV. 34-43)

Opening his mouth, Peter began to preach the Word to his attentive audience. The components of his message included: the attributes of God (vv. 34-35), the moral character of Christ (vv. 35-38), His crucifixion (v. 39), His bodily resurrection, (vv. 40-41), the Great Commission (v. 42) and an offer of salvation to whosoever believes (v. 43). His preaching was personal, powerful and to the point without any apologies. This is the type of preaching that yields results. As stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1), we are not to tamper with the Master's goods, but faithfully dispense what we have been entrusted with, namely Good News from a “far country”, like cold water to a thirsty soul (Prov. 25:25).

HOW GOD CONFIRMS THE MESSAGE (vv. 44-48)

God confirmed the reception of the Gospel message that Peter brought in a number of ways. While he was *still* preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the Word, (v. 44) without the need for “arm-twisting” or long, drawn-out emotional appeals. They magnified God with their speech (v. 46), were immediately baptized and enjoyed Peter’s fellowship, requesting him to stay a few more days (v. 48). It was proof positive that God had confirmed His message and its reception in the lives of those who heard and received His Word.

The conversion of Cornelius speaks to believers today in many ways. It tells us that God is preparing people privately in His own way to hear the Gospel message. It tells us that there are many God-fearing people who are without Christ. It also tells us that while God is working in the lives of the unsaved, He may be at work in our lives as well, breaking down our prejudices so that we go into all the world to bring the Good News of salvation. Centuries before, King Solomon floated large cedars down from Lebanon to begin the work of building his glorious temple in Jerusalem, a work that included the city of Joppa (2 Chron. 2:16). Now God was building a new temple--the Church, a habitation of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22) made up of Jew and Gentile, a work that also included the city of Joppa where Peter received the vision that would begin to change his attitude toward the Gentiles. The Lord had said to Peter on a previous occasion: “I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). With the conversion of Cornelius, Peter caught a real big “fish”-- a centurion and one that did not get away! And so will we, if we let God have His way with us.

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