



## **Cornelius Calls for Peter**

***Acts 10:1-23***

### **The obstacle to gospel outreach**

Chapter 10 of the book of Acts is a kind of turning-point in the whole history of the early church and the mission of that church. Christ had been born of David's house. The Apostles were all from the Jewish people. It had been made clear that the gospel was first to be preached to the Jews. But the gentiles were also to be brought in. They too would share in the benefits of Christ Jesus. This had been foretold in the Old Testament (cf. Psalm 87, Isaiah 49 etc.). The question still remained: how was this to be accomplished?

Were the gentiles going to be brought into the New Testament church by the Jewish people themselves? This is not likely, because there were all manner of barriers between the Jews and the gentiles. Not the least of these was the ceremonial law of God! The Jews also considered the gentiles to be enemies. If the gospel will not be brought to the gentiles by assimilation with the Jews, how will it be done? This was also a real question for the Apostles in the earliest times. They knew the word which included Jew and gentile, but, they also saw the law as forbidding the gentile from coming in unless he first became a Jew. This was a real problem in the early church. Judaizers threatened again and again to undermine the church. These people did not understand the gospel of Christ. Their tradition, although understandable, created many difficulties in the church.

The only way out of the difficulties would be through the Lord's direct revelations concerning this matter. This chapter bears witness to that fact. It had to be made clear to both the gentile and the Jewish leader. It had to be revealed more clearly than before. The gentiles will come! Whether the way is understood or not, God will not allow His purposes to be thwarted. All nations shall serve Him. All men shall call Him blessed.

### **Cornelius' vision**

The ways of the Lord are strange. Certain episodes have already pointed to the fact that the gospel is also for the gentiles, but here it is made clearer than ever before. And, it is made clear through an individual who, up to this time, is totally unknown. In Caesarea, the great city which Herod the Great built and then named after his sovereign, there is a Roman officer, not a highly placed officer, but one who is in charge of one hundred men. This man, unknown to the Apostles, is a devout man who fears God with all his house, gives alms to the people and spends much time in prayer. Among the gentiles there was often a feeling of total emptiness. How could the gods of Rome give comfort to anyone? Some of these turned to the Jewish religion. Here was something far more substantial than that to which they were accustomed. The Jews served a God in whom they trusted. Their religion went far back in history. Their religion spoke to their everyday life. These were some of the attractions for some Roman soldiers who frequently came into contact with the Jews. In this worldly city of Caesarea the need for a strong religion was daily brought home to a thinking man. If an officer had any feeling for the soldiers under him, he would seek to lead them away from the worldliness of this place. Cornelius was the commander of an elite group — the Italian band.

Cornelius observes at least some of the customs of the Jews. He is engaged in prayer at 3:00 P.M., which is the usual hour of prayer. This prayer-time is different from others. He sees an angel, who addresses him by name. He is, of course, afraid! Even a priest in Israel was afraid when he

saw an angel (Luke 1). He has enough presence of mind to ask: *"What is it Lord?"* He is told that his alms and his prayers have not been forgotten. They do not merit anything, but God has taken notice of them. Although his almsgiving and his prayers have not been in vain, they are not sufficient. What he needs is more instruction. Send to Joppa for Peter. Even if Philip, the evangelist, were in Caesarea at this time, only the Lord's Apostle is to be entrusted with this very important instruction. Would it not have been easier for the angel to give this instruction? The preaching of the gospel has been given to men! The angel tells Cornelius where Peter may be found.

There is no delay. As soon as the angel is gone, the officer sends two of his house servants, accompanied by a believing soldier, to carry out the task which had been assigned him. He tells them carefully all that has occurred and they leave at once. Notice that Cornelius has this vision during the time of the evening prayer and the following day at noon they are in Caesarea. This is a day's journey. They must have traveled all night.

### **Peter's vision**

Something else is occurring at Joppa. The Lord works with a double revelation, as He had also done at the time of the conversion of Saul. Saul sees a man by the name of Ananias coming to him and Ananias receives the revelation that he must go to Saul of Tarsus. Something very similar to that occurs now. Peter goes up to an upper room at noon. He prays and falls into a trance. He is hungry and food is being prepared for him. The Lord has beautifully set the scene. By the time Peter's trance has ceased, the men of Caesarea are at the door. He has no time to think of other possible interpretations.

In his trance Peter sees a vessel descending from heaven. It is like a sheet or large table cloth and it contains all the beasts — four-footed and creeping, and birds. This is not the kind of container which looks attractive to him. It, no doubt, contains clean animals, but it also contains the unclean and virtually all the creeping animals were unclean. Notice that he is hungry. The fact that an enormous amount of food is brought before him in this trance speaks to him. He now hears a voice which He recognizes as the voice of the Lord. This voice tells him to arise to butcher and eat! What? Butcher and eat anything which is contained in this vessel? Never! He has been a faithful Israelite who takes the ceremonial law of God seriously. Leviticus 11 has made it very clear that there are many animals which the Israelite may not eat. Therefore his answer is instinctive:

*"Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean."*

Surely, he is not to be faulted for this stance. This is not only the way in which he had been brought up; it isn't only tradition; his Lord had so instructed him. Never had he heard that the ceremonial law had been abolished through the coming of Jesus Christ.

The voice of the Lord says to him: *"What God hath cleansed, make not thou common."*

This is the first time such a revelation has been heard. Such a clear revelation was necessary to change the views of Peter and the whole people of the Jews. To emphasize the teaching even more, the Lord gives him this visual instruction three times! Then it is all taken back into heaven.

Peter thinks about the meaning of the vision for some time, because it is still not clear to him what this instruction implies. May he, who has never tasted anything unclean, now forget about the whole book of Leviticus? Has it come to this? Are all the things which he has been taught to hold dear to be set aside? It is not surprising that this man is perplexed about what this vision might mean. Nor is the lesson of this vision going to make everything crystal clear to him for all time to come. Paul has to *"withstand him to the face"* (Galatians 2:11) later when he is forgetting the lesson learned on this occasion. But, the full light is beginning to dawn. This is clearly shown in the Pauline epistles. The Jews may not rob the gentiles of the freedom which they have in Christ. They will have to learn that *"nothing is unclean of itself"* (Romans 14:14). Every creature of God is good and is to be gratefully received, for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5). Only to the pure, however, are all things pure (Titus 1:15). The Apostles and the Jews must

learn that there is room for the gentiles in the Christian church, even though they have not come by way of Leviticus!

### **Peter's travel orders**

The timing is beautiful! If Peter has some more time to think on the things he has seen, he might be led in the wrong direction. However, the men who have come from the house of Cornelius are standing at the door and are asking for him. Now is not the time for a vision. The Spirit tells Peter to go with these men. He may not doubt whether or not this would be the right thing to do, because, says the Spirit, *"I have sent them!"* He goes down to meet these men, but is still in the dark concerning the things which have taken place in Caesarea. He inquires why they have come. Now the whole story comes out. Already before Peter has had his vision, God has spoken to Cornelius and told him to send for Peter. *"An angel told him to send for thee."* Can you refuse that?

Now, of course, things are beginning to fall into place. Peter, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, must now go to the home of a gentile, but God has been at work there. This man fears God. He is righteous. All the Jews think highly of him. Could it be that that sheet full of animals, both clean and unclean, had something to do with the trip he is about to take? A wonderful experience awaits him in Caesarea.

Henry VanderKam

© 2015  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. The Old Testament did make it clear that eventually the gentiles would also be brought into the fold. Why did this now become a problem?
2. How did such a man as Cornelius come to the faith? Was it true faith?
3. Was Peter right in not wishing to eat of the unclean animals?
4. Why do you think the matter was put to Peter in the way it was?
5. Why were some things clean and others unclean during Old Testament times?
6. Is it understandable that Peter slips away from this clear understanding later? Was it a shock to his faith to see no difference anymore between the clean and the unclean?
7. Can you see why the Jews had difficulty in welcoming the gentiles into the New Testament church? Can such changes come at command, or does it take a period of time to educate the people?