

The Conversion of Cornelius

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 16th. My name is Kent Dixon. It is my joy to be the pastor here. If you missed Valentine's Day, you did miss Valentine's Day.

It was on the 14th. We do not have a floral kiosk in the foyer. Perhaps we should have considered it. But it is good. Express love any time of the year, not just February 14th.

Gentlemen. I'm really glad, I don't know about you, but I'm really glad to be back in our ongoing series on Acts. And a few people, several people, have let me know they feel that way as well. And I don't know about you, but I'm learning a lot. So did I know the book of Acts? Yes. Was I familiar with lots of the pieces and the story in it? Yes. But God is revealing a lot to me as I prepare and I study.

And for my own sake, but also hopefully for you as well. So let's consider a few things that we've recognized so far in the growth of the early church.

[1 : 07] Up to this point, the gospel had been really somewhat limited in its outreach. And as we considered back when we looked at Acts 9.31, it had spread throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

But other than Samaritans, who were technically considered to be a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish ancestry, the gospel of Jesus Christ had only spread among Jewish people.

So our sermon this morning is titled, The Conversion of Cornelius. And spoiler alert, we're about to explore the story of the first Gentile to be converted.

So this conversion was notable not only because he was the first Gentile, but also because of the miraculous events that accompanied his conversion.

And as with Saul of Tarsus, Scripture gives us more than one account of this conversion event. There's Luke's description, which we're going to talk about this morning, given in Acts 10, verses 1 to 48.

[2 : 12] And that's as it happened. And then there's Peter's description, which we get in Acts 11, 1 to 18, when he's called to defend his actions.

And we'll be looking at that next week. So this morning, we're going to focus our attention on Luke's description of the events as they happened. And we're looking at a larger passage together.

So we're going to unpack it as we go. So generally, lots of times in this series, I have started by reading our passage for the morning. But it's a big one, so let's just unpack it as we go, if that is okay with everyone.

So in Luke's account of this conversion, Cornelius, the story begins with Cornelius, a man named Cornelius, having a vision. In Acts 10, 1 to 2, so you can go ahead and turn to 10, and just stay in 10, and we'll be 1 to 48.

Acts 10, verses 1 to 2, we learn about Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion, Scripture tells us, and he's described as a devout and God-fearing man, someone we might describe as, by this description, being religious.

[3 : 25] And I'm using quotey fingers, right? So in verses 3 to 6, we learn that an angel appears to Cornelius in a vision. The angel tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have been noticed by God.

The angel instructs Cornelius to send men to where? Joppa. So you're right, someone said Peter. They will find Peter there, staying with a man named Simon. Remember the end of last week?

Peter was sticking around in Joppa and was staying with a man named Simon the Tanner.

And then these men are to bring Peter back with them. So Cornelius, smart guy, doesn't waste any time. As soon as this angel leaves, he gathers a group of men, some servants, and then a devout soldier, Scripture tells us, so that we can probably assume that this means the soldier was also a

God-fearing man.

So it's not too likely Cornelius would have said, okay, random Roman soldier, go and find a Christian and bring him back to me. Probably not too likely. So Cornelius sends this group of men to Joppa, as the angel has told him, to get Peter.

[4 : 43] So then moving from there, we come to Peter's vision. Picking up in Acts 10, verses 9 to 15, the next day around noon, as Cornelius representatives are getting close to Joppa, we find Peter heads up to the roof of Simon the Tanner in his home to pray.

So Peter heads off on his own, as Jesus did, to pray. And Scripture tells us Peter's hungry. He's waiting for lunch to be prepared. So if you're waiting for a meal to be prepared, and you're either at home or someone else's house, do you go off and pray and just chill?

No, we get antsy, right? I'm hungry. I want to eat right now. But Peter takes the time, takes the opportunity, to go off to pray. And Scripture tells us he falls into a trance.

So during this trance, in this experience, Peter has a vision of a sheet covered with all sorts of creatures. Descending from heaven. And you've probably heard this story or seen this image before.

Peter immediately reacts strongly to this vision. Because he has never eaten anything that he would have been instructed by Jewish law was unclean.

[6 : 01] So Peter's seeing this and saying, no, no, no, no, no, no. Can't do this. So a voice speaks to him. And as the sheet is descending, a voice tells him, get up, Peter.

Peter, kill, and eat. So again, Peter's reacting strongly, right? This goes against what he understands to be law, to be true. And the voice speaks to him again and says, do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

So lots of us know Peter, right? We know his habits, his personality. And so Peter often needed to be hit a few times with a point to get it.

So Luke's account tells us that Peter's vision happened three times. So it's almost as though God was saying, okay, I'm going to tell you this, but it's Peter.

I'm going to tell him again. It's Peter. I'm going to tell him three times, right? So remember, Scripture tells us that when something is repeated, it means what?

[7 : 11] Yeah, listen. It means it's important, right? Repetition. How often as parents have we said, I'm not telling you again, but Scripture and God's messages and God's messengers often told people more than once.

And it's like, did you get it? How about now? How about now, right? And so we can think human nature. I think it's human nature, right?

We don't get it or we don't want to get it. So we have to be told and reminded. And I think that's valid, right? I have to be told many times before I do things at home. So the Spirit instructs Peter in this next part of this story.

So Peter doesn't get much of a break here because just as he's pondering this vision, he's trying to wrap his head around, wait a minute, this goes against what I understood to be right.

Cornelius's entourage arrives, right? These guys show up. And the Scripture says, they're stopped at the gate to Simon's house and they call out looking for Peter.

[8 : 17] So in verses 19 and 20, Peter's still deep in thought and the Spirit speaks to him then to assure him, to tell him not to worry because he, the Spirit, has sent these men to him.

So I think in the early church, right, especially for the apostles, someone shows up looking for you, you're not going, all right, open the door, let's get them in here, right?

There would have been hesitation. And so the Spirit speaks to Peter and says, no, it's okay, I've got this. So Peter greets the men and asks them why they have come.

Imagine how these men must have felt. They were sent to find Peter, a man they probably knew by name, a little bit by reputation, maybe, but they didn't really know him.

And they're sent to get him for a purpose that Cornelius may not have made all that clear to them. So these guys are doing this on faith, on trust, in reputation and relationship that they have with Cornelius.

[9 : 25] So to me, there's a great deal of trust in God that is on display here. And from several people that probably had very limited information.

How often are we willing to listen to what God has to say to us and go, yeah, I'll do it. Or do we go, yeah, but I need to, yeah, but what about, right?

We do that. Again, human nature. So the men tell Peter that they've been sent by Cornelius. And then they give a bit of background, essentially a character reference for Cornelius, right? They're bridging a bit of gap, a gap of information and a gap of relationship. So the men also make it clear that an angel instructed Cornelius to send them.

And then for them to ask for Peter specifically. So they're giving Peter the background that God is all through this. He's at work in this situation.

[10:26] And then Peter invites the men into this house as guests. So Simon the Tanner is probably going, hey, this is my house in the middle of my street. Why are you letting? Anyway, Simon obviously trusting as well, right?

So remember some of the things that we recognized about Joppa, the city of Joppa last week. There was a Christian community there. And that we learn that Peter sets out with some of the believers, scripture says, from Joppa to return to Cornelius in the city of Caesarea.

So there's a Christian community. So again, just as Cornelius sent men who were likely believers, scripture tells us, the men who come back with Peter are as well.

So there's a little bit of mission, intermission work happening here. So Peter arrives. In Acts 10, verse 24, we learn that Peter and his group arrive at Caesarea, where Cornelius is, and that Cornelius was expecting them.

Which is interesting again, right? God is at work through these visions. And Cornelius, we read it, also gathered his relatives and close friends to greet them.

[11:42] It's interesting that when Cornelius arrives, we read in this account, or sorry, when Peter arrives to visit Cornelius, Cornelius falls to his feet, falls at his feet.

As scripture says, in reverence. You'll find that in most translations. He is showing reverence towards Peter. And scripture doesn't tell us why.

We're not really sure why Cornelius would have ascribed this kind of attention or reverence to Peter. It may just have been a sign of respect or honor. Remember, Cornelius was a Roman soldier.

So maybe he was just showing a man that he believed deserved respect, that kind of respect. But Peter is quick to deflect the attention. We recognize that right away.

And he clearly states that he is only a man himself. So he's saying, I'm no better than you. So get up. And it's interesting that when Peter goes into the room where Cornelius, his relatives, and his friends are gathered, Peter makes a statement that is basically, as you probably know, under Jewish law, I shouldn't even be here with you Gentiles.

[12:53] That's basically the message Peter is getting across. Well, what if they didn't know that? Right? What if, can you imagine that? Being invited into somebody's house?

Well, I really shouldn't be associating with you, but, right? Well, this was definitely true from a Jewish perspective. It might have come across as kind of a rude greeting to a non-Jewish audience. Right? At least initially. But fortunately, Peter immediately makes it clear that God said it was okay. God paved the way for this. So his response was to come immediately without hesitation or reservation.

And when Peter asks why they sent for him, Cornelius then tells him about his vision, that an angel had told him to send for Peter and for them to listen to whatever God had commanded Peter to tell them.

So the stage was now set for Peter to share a message with Cornelius and the people gathered in his home. And here comes the message. So let's consider what Peter preached that day.

[14:03] He begins in Acts 10 verses 34 to 35. You can flip there. With this clear message that God doesn't show any favoritism. He accepts any nation or person who fears him and does what is right, scripture says.

So obeys God's laws. It was actually Peter's vision of the animals on the descending sheet that laid the foundation for this message.

And then it continued with the Spirit's endorsement and encouragement to go with the messengers. Then Peter launches into a gospel message.

In Acts 10 verses 36 to 43 Peter proclaims the good news of Jesus. He talks about his baptism and his ministry.

He talks about his death and his resurrection. And then he talks about being witness to all these things. He also tells the group about how Jesus commissioned the apostles and that he then sent

them out to proclaim him and to testify that God appointed him Jesus as the judge of the living and the dead.

[15 : 18] And then that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name, through Jesus' name. And if you read Acts 10 verses 36 to 43 over for yourselves, I encourage you to do it.

Peter really does give a beautiful concise but very powerful gospel sermon there in Acts 10 36 to 43.

What do you think generally happens when the gospel is preached? It's a bit of a rhetorical question so I'll leave it, think about it. I believe that when the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached the Holy Spirit acts to nurture and grow the seeds of that.

Do you believe that? When people who hear that message have truly open and tender hearts, I believe the Spirit works in them immediately.

And that's what we really read happens here. While Peter is still speaking, Scripture tells us in verse 44 that the Holy Spirit came on all who heard this message.

[16 : 30] And we read that the circumcised believers, Jewish believers, who had come with Peter, were astonished, Scripture says, that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out, as it says, even on the Gentiles.

Right? They're still wrapping their heads around God saying, this has changed. It was becoming clear for the first time that this salvation made possible through Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit who came when Jesus returned to heaven truly was for all people.

They would have heard this message, but I think they finally began to get it. The message of Jesus' birth was proclaimed by the angels as being good news for what?

What do the angels say? For all people. The good news was intended from the beginning to be universal, to be for all humanity and not just for the Jewish people.

So this inclusivity actually fulfills the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 3. I see a few people going, what?

[17 : 47] God promises there that all people on the earth will be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Do you remember that message? Here's the culmination of that promise.

Just as Jesus said in his great commission in Matthew 28, 19, he commanded his disciples to make disciples, sorry, commanded his apostles to make disciples of all nations.

It's like he meant it. Peter doesn't hesitate to make it clear that the next steps then for anyone who received this message of the gospel and has become a follower of Jesus is for them to be baptized. And more than that, in Acts 10, 47, it says, surely no one can stand, this is Peter speaking, surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water.

They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. It's as though Peter is declaring to this gathering, maybe even more specifically to the Jewish Christians who are there.

[18 : 56] I think they should be baptized right now. Anyone? Any naysayers? Speak now or forever hold your peace, Peter is essentially saying.

And as I said before, we see Peter's intensity and conviction in many places in the gospels, don't we? So it's no surprise that he's making this case boldly, strongly, for what he knows to be the right course of action.

And he may also have possibly been presenting a challenge to us of sorts, to anyone who believes differently. Ultimately, in verse 48, Peter ordered that everyone who had heard the gospel message, who sought to become devout followers of Jesus, be baptized in the name of Christ. And then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. Scripture tells us. It's always these endings, right? You invite a guest, stick around. You're on vacation now, take a few days off. But these events surrounding this conversion story certainly are remarkable, aren't they? They're clearly intended to convey important truths, not just to the people of that time, but also to future followers of Jesus and Christian communities.

[20 : 19] stories. So let's look at some of these important truths that we can take away. Number one, religious people, remember I used quotey fingers at the beginning, religious people need saving.

Many people believe if you are religious, you'll be saved. I hear some mumbles of agreement. Perhaps the suggestion is that someone is religious, has more negative connotations, I think today it does, than it has had in any other time in history.

Is that fair? But it's actually, is it actually enough to go to church? Is it actually enough to do good things? Is that truly enough to give someone the hope of heaven?

Some folks may even suggest that being that kind of good person somehow gives you the right to enter heaven. Don't get me started on that.

[21 : 29] But we've seen this morning in the story of Cornelius that even though he was a devout man of faith who feared God and along with his whole family, it seems like all the people he gathered were followers.

A man who gave alms to the poor always prayed to God. This is Cornelius' description, right? None of these things, none of these trappings of being religious were sufficient.

Cornelius and his household still needed to receive the message because in Acts 11, 14, looking ahead a little bit, it says through which you and all your household will be saved.

So there is more that needed to happen. Being religious alone isn't what saves us. Hopefully that's not a surprise.

It's hearing the gospel. It's receiving that message of grace and forgiveness and then yielding our lives to Christ.

[22 : 30] As we'll see and we've already seen in some cases, most of the conversion stories in the book of Acts involve people who could have considered, be considered to be religious by some definition or another.

But it's ultimately only the blood of Christ that saves. The second important truth that we can learn is that the gospel is for all nations.

Peter made it quite clear that God doesn't show favoritism. That he will accept people who fear him and do what's right regardless of their national origin.

So any suggestion by anyone that this gospel, this truth, this hope is made for a certain demographic is wrong. John 3.16 says, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Sounds like inclusive language. 1 Timothy 2.3-6 says, This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

[23 : 49] For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for some people, all people.

This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. 2 Peter 3.9 says, The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. This message is clear and consistent that God wants all people to come to him.

The third important truth I think we can learn is the gospel culminates in baptism. It begins with a need to believe in Jesus. It ends with immersion in water.

Baptism is a step of obedience in the discipleship journey. I can't stress this clearly enough. It is a step of obedience. It does not give salvation.

[25 : 02] It's a step of obedience as we seek to follow and grow closer in our relationship with Christ. There are some other observations that we can make from the story and we'll consider those in the next chapter because Peter is called to account for his actions in this story.

While miraculous events surrounded the conversion of Cornelius, his salvation was no different than what we see in other conversion accounts.

He had to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and he was taught to believe and then commanded to be baptized. And as we'll hear Peter say when we get to Acts 15 11, it's through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that both Gentiles and Jews are saved.

As we hear many times in the New Testament, we are saved by grace, not works. It's not enough to simply be religious then, right?

After all, who could be more religious than Cornelius? Who he was declared to be? But that clearly wasn't sufficient, right? We recognize that this morning.

[26 : 19] The 3,000 at Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, Lydia of Thyatira. Couldn't they have all been seen as religious by some definition as well?

Wasn't sufficient for them either, was it? Not alone. The grace of God which saves requires a response. A response of faith in who Jesus was and who he is.

This faith in Jesus only comes by hearing the gospel. Faith which expresses itself in obedience, particularly obedience in repentance and baptism.

And these again are not works of merit. These are not gold stars on our record for which we can take credit ourselves. These are acts of faith by which we can receive God's gifts of forgiveness. Those of us who aren't descended from Israel, we can rejoice in what God declared in his word and then revealed in the conversion of Cornelius.

[27 : 38] As properly concluded by Jewish brethren in Jerusalem, God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.

Have you taken advantage of this wonderful gift by responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ in faith, in repentance and baptism?

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Amen.