

Sovereign in Salvation

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] We're going to see the beginning of this story of Cornelius and Peter. And what we're going to think about is the fact that God is sovereign in salvation.

We're going to see God in charge in order that Cornelius will come to faith in the Lord Jesus. So Acts chapter 10, we're going to read the first 23 verses.

At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day, about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, Cornelius. Cornelius stared at him in fear. What is it, Lord? He asked. The angel answered, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

[1 : 01] Now, send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is by the sea.

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat.

And while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.

Then a voice told him, get up, Peter. Kill and eat. Surely not, Lord, Peter replied. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. The voice spoke to him a second time.

[2 : 03] Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.

They called out, asking if Simon, who is known as Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you, so get up and go downstairs.

Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them. Peter went down and said to the men, I am the one you are looking for. Why have you come? The men replied, we have come from Cornelius the centurion.

He is a righteous and God-fearing man who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.

Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. Amen. This is God's word. Now what I want us to see in this story of Peter and Cornelius is the fact that our stories exist within a larger story.

[3 : 17] They exist within God's bigger story. And God takes people's lives and weaves them together for his own purposes.

Now when I was, I guess, a student, I used to watch a lot of films. And in the late 90s and then into the early 2000s, there was a lot of filmmakers who were doing this thing where they would have multiple main characters.

And they would have sort of lives that would be very separate. But then at some point in the drama, those lives would interconnect. Usually at the climax of the drama, you'd see how all these various individuals became part of the same story.

And in a sense, what we're being presented by Luke here is two very separate stories. The story of Cornelius and Peter that God brings together so that the gospel will expand into non-Jewish territory.

So you've got this man, Cornelius, who's part of Roman special forces. And you've got this guy, Peter. He's an apostle to the Jews. There are some servants and messengers at the same time. [4 : 30] And most of all, what comes out is God's directing through angels, through visions, through the Holy Spirit so that Cornelius can hear the gospel.

So we've got these two people that would never normally have any contact with each other. They'd never be hanging out. It's an opportunity for the gospel that Peter, I'm sure, would never have anticipated.

But God brings these lives together so that he would be glorified. He's the first Gentile convert to faith in Jesus. Comes in Cornelius and his household. And it's the beginning of Gentile mission, just as Jesus had promised.

So let's look, first of all, at Cornelius. So who was Cornelius? Now we're told in verse 1 that he was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.

An elite set of troops stationed in Caesarea, a key city of Roman culture and a place where Rome exercised control.

[5 : 32] Powerful guy, authoritative guy. But he's also, we're told, a God-fearer. Verse 2. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

Now that means he is a non-Jewish person who is choosing to worship in the synagogue. He's choosing to follow Old Testament ethics and practices.

Him and his family have decided they want to follow the God of Israel. And so this leads him, leads Cornelius to, well, first of all, lead his family in that direction.

Here is an example of a man who is leading his family in faith. It leads him also to practice generosity. And we're told also in verse 2, it leads him to regular times of prayer.

So on the one hand, you could say, well, here's Cornelius. He's an enemy. He's an outsider. He's far from the covenant. He's far from being one of the people of God. But on the other hand, we can also see clear evidence that he is someone who is seeking after God.

[6 : 35] That he wants to know the God of the Bible so that he might worship him. And at that point, we just need to remind ourselves that whenever we read of that, we need to recognize that that in itself is a gift of God.

Where does that come from? Where does this sense of dissatisfaction with the gods of the Romans come from? Where does his sense of my life is not going in the right direction? I need the God of Israel.

Where does that come from? It doesn't come from himself. It's because God's at work. The spirit is at work. And that's true for any of us before we come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

So I want us to see next, how does God seek this man, Cornelius? And we're told in verse 3, one day about 3 in the afternoon, he had a vision.

He saw an angel of God who spoke to him. And here's a, it seems like a small thing, but it's a remarkable thing that God again is revealing himself to and outside it.

[7 : 36] Here is a reminder that God's kingdom is broad and not narrow. That because Christianity is about grace and not about law, it tends to be inclusive and not exclusive.

And we get another preview of that here. So we get the vision. And what we see as the angel speaks to Cornelius, verse 4, is that God is responding to Cornelius wanting to know him, wanting to please him.

So the angel says to him in verse 4, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. And so the angel then tells him to go and send for Peter.

Because if Cornelius is to know God truly, then he needs to hear the gospel. He needs to hear about Jesus, the Son of God, who's come to be the Savior of the world.

And so they are to send messengers to Joppa to find Simon Peter. And that's exactly what Cornelius does in verses 7 and 8.

[8 : 43] He does everything that God said and he sends the messengers off to Joppa. So that's about 32 miles away from Caesarea. And we'll think about that in a few moments.

Remember that saying that Jesus had where he said, Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. And Cornelius is proving that to be true.

He is someone who is seeking after God. God's put that in his heart. He's seeking after God and God responds. God is going to move Peter to bring the gospel so that he can be saved.

There's always encouragement to us when we read stories like the stories we find in the book of Acts to pray for people to be open, to pray for people to be seeking for God.

Because I guess from an outsider's point of view, Cornelius would be a very surprising kind of a convert. And it's a reminder to us to trust that God in his grace and mercy and love is far more generous than sometimes we imagine or anticipate.

[9 : 53] And it's true as well. And maybe you know this in your own experience. Sometimes we can be less surprised, perhaps, by the people that God chooses to work in their heart. We would think, I have this friend, and they look like the kind of person that might be interested in faith and religion.

And then you get really surprised because this family member or this friend from out of nowhere, so it seems, develops a real desire to read the Bible, to know more about Jesus. God is constantly at work by his Spirit in ways that are surprising.

But it always reminds us that it's God who's in charge. It's God's big story that we are a part of. He's in charge and not us. So we've got this story.

We've got this story of Cornelius and his vision over in Caesarea. But then we meet our other character. We've got Peter. So who is Peter? Well, we know that he's one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, of course.

And the one thing, as I was reading this week, a couple of commentators pointed out, remember that saying, you maybe remember the saying that Jesus delivered about Peter saying, I will give you the keys of the kingdom.

[11 : 03] And they were saying, well, in part, in Peter's experience, that means that he's going to, first of all, lead mission to the Jews. And we saw that at Pentecost.

Peter preaches and 3,000 diaspora Jews are added to the church. And Peter will also begin mission to the Gentiles here as he is sent to Cornelius.

So Peter's message, his gospel message, opens up mission to both Jews and non-Jews. But Peter, and it's important we see it in the passage, he's part of the Jewish religious tradition.

So he had strict rules about what he could and what he couldn't eat, who he could and couldn't eat with. These laws that created separation.

We forgot to speak about holiness. He was raised in a system where the Jews were the people of God. They were the insiders. Because they had the promises, and Romans, by many, would be regarded as both enemies and outsiders.

[12 : 10] And so for the gospel to take root, for this mission to come from Peter to Cornelius, God's going to need to overcome some cultural and religious prejudice.

I like the fact, given that we've just finished studying in Jonah, that here is another example of somebody called in Joppa to go and preach good news to enemies.

But unlike Jonah, who ran the other way, Peter will go from Joppa to Caesarea to bring grace to enemies. Now, that being said about Peter, how does God use Peter to seek after Cornelius?

We see in verse 9 that he does it again through a vision. So about noon the following day, as they were on their journey, so we're reminded there's another story going on, they're approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. So here is Peter, he's hungry, and he has this dream about food.

[13 : 23] Maybe that's happened to us, naturally, but only this time this vision is sent from God. There is a teaching purpose in this vision, and we know it's from God, because in verse 16 we're told it happens three times.

God is clearly trying to relay an important message to Peter. So what is this vision, and what's it all about?

So he sees in verse 11, heaven opens, sheep comes down, you've got this great sheep with clean and unclean animals on the sheep, and then there's this voice, Get up, Peter, kill and eat.

And Peter, as an Orthodox Jew, refuses, because you don't eat clean meat that's been mixed with unclean meat.

So he says, Surely not, Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. Verse 15, the voice speaks, Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

[14 : 26] So this happens three times. Now notice, we read it in verse 14, Peter refuses the command of the one that he knows is the Lord God.

So he knows God is speaking, and still he says, No, I'm not going to do that. Perhaps he thinks this is a test of his orthodoxy.

Will he remain a faithful Jew? Or perhaps this is just teaching him something that's such a new reality that he really can't quite get his head around it, and God needs to speak to him three times in order to begin to break down barriers.

Because what we discover is that the vision is a parable. And Peter understands that the vision is a parable, and we know this when we, we'll get there next week, but in verse 28, When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, and there's a crowd gathered, he said to them, You are well aware that it's against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him.

But God has shown me that I should not call any man, any body, impure or unclean. So they had clean and unclean food, and in this vision it's a parable for the idea that God's people had divided the world into clean people and unclean people.

[15 : 52] And God's saying in this new age, this new age of grace, you're not to think that way anymore. That now that Jesus has come, fulfilling the promise of Genesis 12 to Abraham, blessing to the nations, those distinctions no longer are relevant.

Again, a reminder that God's kingdom is much wider, his grace flows much deeper than often we recognize. And then in verse 17, we're introduced to a particular aspect of this reality that God's in control of all things and he's in control of salvation.

We see his perfect timing. So remember, the servants have left Caesarea, this 32-mile journey, that's going to take them a while.

But just as Peter has received the vision and he's wondering about it, these guys arrive right on cue, knocking at the door. Where is Peter? And then he hears this spirit speaking to him, telling him in verse 20, get up and go downstairs.

Do not hesitate to go with them. I have sent them. And he discovers from them that he is to go, verse 22, to meet Cornelius.

[17 : 14] And a holy angel had told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say. And Peter very clearly recognizes God's hand in this whole thing.

That God has been preparing the way through a vision over here in Caesarea, vision over here in Joppa. He's been tearing down some cultural prejudices in Peter's heart all the while so that Cornelius and his family will get to hear of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Now there's another couple of hints in the text that God has been at work and continues to be at work in Peter's heart, breaking down some of his old barriers.

First one, it almost seems like an unimportant piece of information, but did you notice where Peter is staying? Verse 6, it says to us he is staying with Simon the Tanner.

Simon who is some kind of leather worker. And to work with dead animals would be the kind of job that would render a person unclean.

[18 : 25] Therefore, you should not stay in their house, but Peter stays with him. Here is traces of that same attitude of Jesus that moved towards those who were considered by others to be unclean.

And then again, and it's significant, who does Peter invite into his house in verse 23? We're told Peter invited the men, these servants, these soldiers, soldiers, these Romans, into the house to be his guests.

Again, they'd be considered unclean, they'd be considered enemies, but Peter shows them hospitality. God is at work in Peter's heart and he's beginning to understand that grace breaks down barriers.

Now, just as a kind of semi-aside, a couple of times this week, either in conversation or in readings, the topic of what's sometimes known as evangelistic hospitality has come up, which I think is really what's going on in Peter's experience here.

Basically, the idea being that nowadays we can use our homes and use meals as a way to share the gospel as we share our lives with people.

[19 : 46] Nothing particularly radical, but I guess we all recognize that when we have someone in our house, when we sit down and share a meal with someone, that's when conversation tends to go beyond just surface level and moves to deeper level where we can talk about one another's values

and what we think about the world and issues of faith or belief in God may come up.

And it's also as we invite people into our homes that they can see if we're Christians how Christians tick. How do we operate? How do we treat one another? How do we deal with family dynamics? Those kind of things. And so it can be a really powerful thing and there's a number of new books all on this topic suggesting that one of the most important things that we can discover, recover, or continue with as a Christian church is the idea of hospitality with a purpose.

Inviting people in so they might have a chance to discover more about God and that's what Peter does here. But what we see in this whole story is that God is building his church, God is in control, and he's weaving these stories together for his own glory.

The story of Cornelius and Peter is really crucial to the book of Acts. It's why it gets so much attention. It gets like basically two chapters. And it's after this that Peter begins largely to fade into the background and Paul, as missionary to the Gentiles, begins to take center stage.

[21 : 21] It's a really important story. What does it say to us? Well, it certainly reminds us that God's kingdom is broad. It transcends cultures and hostilities and we are encouraged to think like that and to pray like that.

It certainly should lead us to worship God and to give him glory for the way that he acts and moves in people's lives to save them as if we're Christians, he has acted to save us, bringing people into our lives, perhaps parents or perhaps friends or somebody that we spend time with at university. None of that is accidental. God weaves our stories into his bigger story and connected with that, we can be encouraged that God is still active, God is still building his church, God is still using our lives, the lives of his people as a way for others to know more about him and to know more of his love so that they too can meet Jesus.

I do not trust about this among by