

# Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius [NRSV]

**10** In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. <sup>2</sup> He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. <sup>3</sup> One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." <sup>4</sup> He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; <sup>6</sup> he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." <sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, <sup>8</sup> and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup> About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry<sup>1</sup> and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." <sup>15</sup> The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

<sup>17</sup> Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. <sup>18</sup> They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. <sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three<sup>[a]</sup> men are searching for you. <sup>20</sup> Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." <sup>21</sup> So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" <sup>22</sup> They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." <sup>23</sup> So Peter<sup>[b]</sup> invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers<sup>[c]</sup> from Joppa accompanied him. <sup>24</sup> The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. <sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." <sup>27</sup> And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; <sup>28</sup> and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. <sup>31</sup> He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. <sup>32</sup> Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' <sup>33</sup> Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

## Gentiles Hear the Good News

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup> We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

## Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, <sup>46</sup> for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" <sup>48</sup> So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Fun fact!* "The word translated 'hungry' in v. 10 occurs elsewhere, so far as is known, only in a first-century eye doctor named Demosthenes. F. W. Dillstone suggests that Luke may have been a pupil of his." (FF Bruce, *Acts*, 218fn12)

## Background:

First-century anthropology included:

- *Jews*
- *Proselytes*: circumcised Gentile converts
- *God-fearers*: uncircumcised Gentiles who “were attracted by the ethical standard of the Jewish way of life. Some of them attended synagogue and were tolerably conversant with the prayers and the Scripture lessons, which they heard read in the Greek version; some observed with more or less scrupulosity such distinctive Jewish practices as sabbath observance and abstinence from certain kinds of food” (FFB 216) God-fearers were second-class citizens in Jewish society.
- *Pagans*: idolatrous Gentiles

Judaism knew how to interact with each of these as well as the fates that awaited each. There were, e.g., Jews who believed that God-fearers had a place in the afterlife, if only to come and bend the knee in fulfillment of OT prophecy. Jewish Christians clearly initially retained this anthropology. In fact, only one category is in question: the God-fearers.

## Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius

1. Cornelius prayed and gave alms. Peter later says this puts him in the category of those who “fear God and do what is right and acceptable to him” (34). We often in the gospels read of the gospel finding fertile soil in the opposite sort of person—the tax collector, the poor, the leper, all in contrast to those who were doing the right thing.

Why is this different? Does the gospel appeal to bad Jews and good Gentiles?

Which category did adult converts you’ve known or heard of fall into?

2. Luke makes sure to mention that Peter is hungry when he falls asleep. In the food in the vision appealing or repellant to him?

Was Cornelius himself, as a Gentile and a soldier of the occupying force which had crucified Jesus, repellant to Peter?

3. The divine orchestration which went into planning and coordinating the events in this passage is breathtaking. Why did God need to bring in angels and visions and speaking in tongues, all just to deliver the gospel to a God-fearing Gentile?

4. As F. F. Bruce points out,

That the first Gentile to hear and accept the gospel should be a God-fearer is the more significant because, as we shall see later in Acts, it was such God-fearers who formed the nucleus of the Christian community in one city after another in the course of Paul’s missionary activity.

Arguably, it would be much easier to share the gospel with Gentile proselytes than Gentile God-fearers. Why start with the God-fearers?

5. John Wesley, based on a careful and thoughtful reading of 10:35, saw Cornelius and others like him as belong to a fascinating category: those who are servants of God, but not yet children by adoption.<sup>2</sup> Like Abraham, Cornelius has the faith to follow and the heart to pray and listen but hasn’t known or accepted Jesus. Wesley writes,

But what is the faith which is properly saving? Which brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God and of the things of God as even in its *infant state* enables everyone that possesses it to “fear God and work righteousness.” And whosoever in every nation believe thus far the Apostle declares is “acceptable of him.” He actually is at that very moment in a *state* of acceptance. But he is at present only a servant of God, not properly a [son or daughter].<sup>3</sup>

Setting aside soteriology, the idea of this new category may be useful in thinking of both those of our friends who don’t yet know Christ, but are reaching out to God. How would you speak to such a friend about the gospel?

Similarly, we may ask if there are members of our church whose understanding of the gospel is such that they are servants more than daughters and sons? How can you best minister to them?

Finally, is this category as matter or understanding or practice? Do you ever find yourself relating to God more like Cornelius than like Peter?



*Fun Chrysostom quote:* “If you fast without giving alms, your fasting is not considered to be valid. Rather, such a person is worse than a glutton and a drunkard, and so much worse as cruelty is harder to bear than luxury. And why do I speak about fasting? Even though you are chaste, even though you observe virginity, if you do not cultivate charity you are out of the bridal chamber.”

<sup>2</sup> Wesley would come to see this as a Christian in the lowest degree; see Olson, fn. 3, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> “On Faith (Heb 11:6)” l.10, Works 3:497 (emphasis added). See also “The Roots of John Wesley’s Servant Theology,” Mark K. Olson, 121.