

VOICES FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"From Pagan To Christian"

by Cornelius

"I have the proud distinction of being the first Gentile received into the Christian Church. In me began the fulfillment of the promise that light would be given to the Gentiles. It is not to be wondered at that my experience and that of my friends who were with me was somewhat unusual. We spoke with tongues even as did the disciples upon the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell upon them. This was to signal the acceptance of the Gentiles into the Church of CHRIST. Of speaking in tongues, however, I do not glory as much as I do that in CHRIST I found my Saviour and One who satisfied the deep hunger and thirst of my soul.

"My name is Cornelius. No name was more honorable in Rome than that of the Cornelian House. My parents constantly impressed upon me to uphold the honour of our family name. My parents were considered to be very old fashioned because they still believed in the old Roman virtues of honesty, keeping one's oath, chastity, and faithfulness to the marriage relationship. All this was out of style in my day and generation. This was due to the Grecian influence. Although we conquered the Greeks yet they conquered us with their infidelity and frivolity.

"It was due to my parents that I took a more serious view of life. Then sensuality, drunkenness, and immorality that was rife in Rome disgusted me. There was something within me which could take no enjoyment in the debaucheries that were so prevalent in Rome. I longed for something better. My soul seemed hungry for truth and virtue.

"I began a search for something which would satisfy the hunger of my soul. Early in life I realized that the worship of Roman gods was a farce. We had many gods. Every phase of life was controlled by some god. There was the god of the field, the god of the pasture, the god of sowing, the god of harvest, and the god of the fruit. We even had a god by the name of Juno Unxia whose work was to anoint the door-hinges at weddings. For a while I sought to appease these gods by prayers, penances, and sacrifices. But I found no satisfaction for my soul. I felt that the gods were not real. In common with the ruling classes and the intellectuals of our day we often went through a form of worship of these gods for we thought it was a good way to keep the

masses quiet but we did not believe in them.

"Some of my friends in Rome turned to the philosophy of Epicurus. According to this philosopher the great evil that afflicted men was fear: fear of the gods and fear of death. His aim was to get rid of these fears. He taught that the gods have nothing to do with the affairs of men and thus not to be feared. He taught that death meant the end of our existence and thus not to be feared. The chief aim of life was pleasure.

"This type of teaching appealed to many. But I could not rid my soul of the thought that I was responsible to some god. Something within me convinced me that there were supernatural beings to whom an account of life had to be made. I could not rid my soul of the fear of some unknown god or gods. Also I felt that my soul was immortal. There was a life beyond this life. The philosophy of Epicurus could not satisfy the hunger and thirst of my soul.

"Stoicism had a greater appeal to me and to many other Romans. It sought to crush the evil passions of the soul. But in so doing it seemed to crush the soul itself. Not only evil passions but natural affections, such as love for family, were to be obliterated. Many of the stoics did not believe in the immortality of the soul. The god of the stoic did not seem to be a personal god but the universe. This philosophy left my soul cold. There was still that feeling of dissatisfaction. The hunger and thirst of my soul were still present.

"It was while I was under the influence of stoicism that I sought a career in the army of the Empire. Fame seemed to be the highest aim of life. By military exploits I would again bring glory to the name of Cornelius. So I became a centurion over a cohort. My company was sent to Palestine to keep the country of the Jews in order. We were stationed in Caesarea wherein was the residence of the Procurator. My wife and children accompanied me.

"In Caesarea I came in contact with the Jews and their religion. My first contact was not pleasant. The Jews hated us Romans. Of course, it is understandable that a conquered nation should hate those who conquered them. But never have I witnessed such bitter hatred. Gradually, however, I won a few friends amongst the Jews but even they acted strangely. I befriended a certain Jew and did him a real service. He seemed very grateful. I asked him to have dinner with me at my home. But he seemed shocked at the thought of dining with me and refused. I learned later that it was part of their religion to have no dealings with Gentiles. It was alright to do business with us but there was to be no social relationships.

"There were several who told me about their religion. I was fascinated by their conception of GOD. There was but one GOD who ruled over the world. He was the Creator of the world. We were His creatures. What interested me was that this GOD did not have the weaknesses of our gods. He was righteous and holy. He would not tolerate evil. He had the power to deliver His people. There was no material form to this GOD; He was a spirit. He had revealed Himself and His will to certain prophets.

"I came under the conviction that the GOD of the Jews was the true GOD. He satisfied my soul more than any god or any philosophy. I began to pray to Him and taught my family also to worship Him. But there were certain things about the Jewish religion which brought doubt in my heart: not concerning their GOD but their manner of worship. I went up with the Procurator to Jerusalem and observed the worship in the Temple of the Jews. It seemed like a business to me.

There was the selling of sacrifices and exchanging of money. I was disappointed because I expected a high type of worship - something different than the worship at the temples of Roman gods.

"When I arrived back at Caesarea I told my Jewish friends of my disappointment. They told me of their expectations of the Messiah who would teach them all things. GOD had promised to send them one greater than Moses who would instruct them in all things. This reminded me of the rumors I had heard concerning a man by the name of JESUS. As a matter of fact, I heard about him from a fellow officer who was stationed in Jerusalem. He had charge of the crucifixion of this JESUS.

"He told me about the trial of JESUS before Pilate. It seems that JESUS claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of GOD. The Jews felt that this was blasphemy and according to their laws he should be stoned to death. Pilate yielded to their wishes and condemned the man to be crucified although his heart was not in it. Pilate gave JESUS into the charge of my friend who also was a centurion. Some of the rougher element of his soldiers scourged JESUS and played with him. They had heard that the Jews refused to acknowledge that JESUS was their king so they thought they would make him a king in mockery. They placed a crown of thorns upon him and mockingly worshipped him as king.

"Then my friend told me about the crucifixion. He told me that things proceeded about as usual until noonday. Then darkness came over the land. This remained for three hours. He then heard this JESUS cry out with a loud voice and suddenly the earth did quake and rocks were split. Graves were opened and it was reported that the bodies of the dead were seen. This sent fear into the heart of my friend and he felt that this JESUS truly was the Son of the GOD of the Jews. Later it was reported that this JESUS rose from the tomb.

"Whatever all this meant I continued my prayers to GOD. My soul was not entirely satisfied. I felt that there was something lacking in my relationship to GOD. I felt so unworthy and guilty before Him. But while I was praying about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of GOD appeared to me. Fear entered into my heart and I said: **'What is it, Lord?'** And he said to me: **'Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: he lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.'**

"This vision filled my heart with joy. At last I would know the truth. At last my soul would be satisfied. Oh that this Peter might come speedily and reveal unto me the will of the living GOD. I called two of my servants and a devout soldier and sent them to Joppa even as the angel told me. While they went I called my kinsmen and close friends. They became as excited as I for many longed to know the truth concerning GOD.

"Several days later Peter came along with some of his friends. When I realized that here was a man of GOD who had a message for me from GOD, I fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But he wanted no worship. He took me up and said: **'Stand up; I myself also am a man.'** Then he said to us: **'Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon**

as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?'

"I answered: 'Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa, and call hither Simon, whose surname is Peter; he is lodged in the house of one Simon a tanner by the sea side: who, when he cometh, shall speak unto thee. Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.'

"Peter replied with his message from GOD. He said: 'Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (He is Lord of all:) that word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of the quick and the dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.'

"At this point the Holy Spirit came upon us. We believed the message of salvation. We believed on the name of the Lord JESUS CHRIST. We believed that through His name we received the remission of sin. The Holy Spirit enabled us to speak with tongues to magnify the living GOD who was so gracious in sending His messenger to us with the good news of salvation.

"This astonished the friends of Peter. They never expected that the Holy Spirit would be given to the Gentiles. But Peter said: **'Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?'** Then we who believed were baptized.

"Never have I ceased praising GOD for the blessing of salvation. It is a matter of joy to me that I was the first Gentile to enter in the Christian Church. But of greater joy was the realization that the door of the Church was open to all Gentiles. The partition between Jew and Gentile has been broken down through the blood of CHRIST. In CHRIST there is neither Roman nor Jew, Barbarian nor Greek, bond nor free. We are one body in Christ JESUS.

"It was also a matter of joy to me that we Romans received a special gift of the Holy Spirit in that we spoke with tongues - a sign that the Gospel key had been used to open the door to the Gentiles, and as a sign to the Jews. The gracious Lord thus indicated to the believing Jews, who found it so difficult to leave their prejudice against Gentiles, that we, too, were acceptable to the Lord and could receive the promises. That was a matter of greater rejoicing.

"But my greatest joy was that GOD revealed JESUS CHRIST to my soul as Lord and Saviour. Now I testify that my soul is satisfied. I have peace with GOD. I found no satisfaction in the gods of the Romans or the Greeks. I found no satisfaction in the various philosophies of our day. CHRIST and CHRIST alone satisfied my soul.

"Now if it chance that my voice reaches those who are groping for truth, seeking for soul satisfaction, and longing for peace with the living GOD: let me point you to the CHRIST even as Peter pointed Him out to me. In His name and in His name alone is there remission of sin and reconciliation with the true GOD. May GOD by His Holy Spirit reveal the CHRIST to your soul."

~ end of chapter 15 ~
