

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER NINETEEN CORNELIUS OR THE CHURCH OPENED TO THE GENTILES (Acts 10:1-48)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 34-35

GENERAL REVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

1. Who was Cornelius?
2. His character.
3. The heavenly visitor.
4. The angel's message.
5. Peter's preparation.
6. The vision.
7. The timely arrival.
8. The divine assurance.
9. The night together.
10. The journey together.
11. The glad welcome.
12. Words of introduction.
13. Peter's sermon.
14. Gentiles admitted to the church.

LESSONS OF PERMANENT VALUE

1. To the one doing the best he knows God will give light.
2. It is important that we do God's will at once.
3. If we are to grow in knowledge we must be ready to be taught.
4. We need a larger vision of the love of God.
5. God helps us by His providence to understand revealed truth.
6. If we are really interested in the Gospel we will try to gather friends to hear.
7. God prepares the message of the speaker to suit the heart of the hearer.
8. God knows no racial or national boundaries.
9. The ordinances are for all Christians.

The paragraph preceding this told of the activity of Peter as he visited the various assemblies of the saints throughout Palestine. We left him at Joppa whither he had been called by the friends of Dorcas. We learned that he worked miracles and led many to believe in the Lord.

The chapter before us, with the exception of Pentecost, is possibly the most important event in the life of Peter. The chapter is taken up principally with two men, Cornelius and Peter. These two men, at the opening of the chapter, were about thirty miles apart. How are they to be gotten together? The difficult barrier, however, is not the thirty miles between Joppa and Caesarea, that distance could be covered in a day and a half. The main barrier is national prejudice. The problem is how to break down that wall of prejudice. The distance between Jew and Gentile, up to this time, was very great. It took a vision, the visit of an angel and a wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to break down the barrier and bring Jew and Gentile together. There is no problem too hard for the Lord to solve, no work too hard for the Lord to do. He solved one of the hardest problems in the world; He broke down an age-old barrier which for centuries had separated the Hebrews and the Gentiles. He convinced the leader of the apostles, and later through him the whole apostolic church, that Jew and Gentile are on an equality as brethren; that there is no racial or religious superiority; that all are one in Christ Jesus.

WHO WAS CORNELIUS

Cornelius was a Roman centurion who was stationed at Caesarea. The name was famous in Italy. Some distinguished Romans had come from that family. A centurion was the captain of one hundred men. The most of the soldiers who were stationed at Caesarea, we are told, were Syrians. The band of which Cornelius was the head, however, were Romans from Italy. Caesarea was located on the coast of the Mediterranean about thirty miles north of Joppa. It was built by Herod the Great and named after Caesar.

HIS CHARACTER

That which is more important than his office, nationality or family name is the character of Cornelius. We do not usually go to the army to find a man distinguished for his devotion to God, yet here we find such a man. He was **“A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway”** (10:2). The fact that he was devout and prayed to God does not mean that he was a Jewish proselyte, for he evidently was not. When the Jews heard the story of his conversion later they said: **“Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life”** (11:18).

THE HEAVENLY VISITOR

It was during the day-time, about the ninth hour of the day - three o'clock as we reckon time - that an angel appeared to Cornelius. He was at first afraid but when he asked, **“What is it, Lord?”** (10:4) the angel spoke to him in plain language.

THE ANGEL'S MESSAGE

The angel said to him, **“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”** (10:5-7). Cornelius was not long in putting the command of the angel into practice. He called two of his servants and a faithful soldier and told them what he had seen and heard, and sent them to Joppa.

PETER'S PREPARATION

Before these messengers reached Joppa the Lord showed Peter a vision that he might be prepared for their reception. Peter needed a stronger lesson than the soldier, Cornelius, to teach him that he should go to Caesarea with these men. Peter was gladly going about enthusing the assemblies among the Jews; but he was not willing, prior to this time, to go to a distinctly Gentile community and ask them to believe on Christ with the object of receiving them directly into the church.

THE VISION

As the messengers from Cornelius came near to Joppa, Peter was on the housetop praying. It was about noon the day after the angel had appeared to Cornelius. As Peter prayed he saw a vision. The heaven seemed to open and a vessel like a great sheet, held by the four corners, was let down to the earth. It was filled with all manner of four-footed beasts and creeping things of the earth and birds of heaven. **“And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven”** (10:13-16).

THE TIMELY ARRIVAL

Peter was greatly perplexed as to the meaning of this vision. While he was thinking upon it the men, who had been sent by Cornelius, came to the gate of Simon's house and called, in eastern fashion, asking whether Peter were lodging there.

THE DIVINE ASSURANCE

The Spirit said to Peter: **“Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them. Then Peter went down to the men which were sent unto him from Cornelius; and said, Behold, I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?”** (10:19-21). The men told Peter of the message of the angel to Cornelius and that they had come to ask him to go with them to speak to him.

THE NIGHT TOGETHER

Peter then invited the men to remain with him in the house of Simon until the next day. This was a strange but blessed company. There was Peter, a leader among the apostles, Simon an outcast tanner - for remember that Simon was compelled by law to live a distance from the city - and three Gentiles, all abiding under the same roof. Peter was already drawing near to the Gentiles. They no doubt had a blessed fellowship together through the remainder of that day and the next as they journeyed.

THE JOURNEY TOGETHER

There were ten in the little group which journeyed the next day toward Caesarea. There were six who went with Peter from Joppa: **“And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the mans house”** (11:12). The brethren at Joppa had urged Peter to come to their city. He had endeared himself to them while he was with them. Peter was no doubt pleased to have their company for he could not but know that he would be glad later, to have witnesses of what had been said and what had taken place at Caesarea, among the Gentiles.

THE GLAD WELCOME

On the second day Peter and his companions arrived at Caesarea. Cornelius was waiting for them. He had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered the house Cornelius met him, not with pomp and soldierly dignity, but he fell down at his feet and worshipped him. Peter would not permit any act of reverence offered to him. He raised Cornelius up saying, **“Stand up; I myself also am a man”** (10:26).

WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

Peter found that many had come together to meet him and to hear him. **“He said unto them, 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 showed 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?”** (10:28-29).

Cornelius then told Peter how he had been keeping the ninth hour of prayer four days before, and how an angel had appeared to him that he had done well to come and that the company which was gather, had come as in the sight of God, to hear all things that had been commended them of God.

PETER’S SERMON

This opened the way for Peter to deliver a sermon to the assembled group of Gentiles.

It is interesting to note the correspondence between this sermon and the first sermon which Peter preached at Pentecost. We suppose that we have merely a synopsis of his sermon here. It is worth nothing how fully he was able to cover the important facts concerning Christ in so short a time. Just how long Peter may have spoken we do not know, possibly not very long, for before he had finished the Holy Spirit came upon them as he came upon the Jews at Pentecost. The sermon was never finished. Their hearts had been opened to receive Christ and the Spirit had come into their hearts with power.

Peter's sermon was about Christ. He taught them that God is no respecter of persons. In every nation the man who fears God and worketh righteousness is acceptable to Him. John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus. He pointed out Jesus to the disciple. The Holy Spirit had anointed Jesus. He had appeared in visible form and abode upon him. Christ had great power to work miracles. He went about doing good and healing those that were oppressed of the devil. God was always with Him. He was hung upon the Cross. After He was buried He was raised from the dead the third day. He appeared to many witnesses. He commissioned His disciples to preach before He ascended into Heaven. He is now JUDGE of both the living and the dead. He calls on men, whether Jews or Gentiles, to believe. He is ready to forgive them if they ask Him.

The prophets bore witness beforehand of the coming of Jesus. Peter and others bore witness of His life, death and resurrection. The call is to every one to believe on His name. Such was the substance of Peter's sermon in the house of Cornelius.

THE EFFECT OF THE SERMON

The effect of Peter's sermon at this time was wonderful. Except from the standpoint of numbers it was as remarkable as it had been at Pentecost. While he was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word. **“And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God”** (10:45-46). Peter said later: **“God gave them the like gift as he did unto us”** (11:17).

GENTILES ADMITTED TO THE CHURCH

“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days” (10:47-48). Peter had learned the lesson that God had intended that he should learn. He had learned that Christ was able to cleanse Gentile as well as Jew from all sin. He had learned that men need no longer enter the church by way of circumcision and Jewish ceremonies, but that all might enter on equal terms who had faith in Jesus Christ. There can be no doubt that Peter understood his action here as receiving men into the fellowship of the Christian church. He defended his action later, in the presence of critics, by telling them that he had been convinced by the vision which God had showed him and by the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Gentiles, that God had intended that the Gentiles should be received and that it was not for him to withstand God.

In this chapter there are many lessons of permanent value. It is well for us to pause to note a few of them.

TO THE SEEKER GOD WILL GIVE LIGHT

When one is doing the best that he knows, making the best of the light that he has, God will give more light. Cornelius was not a Christian until after Peter brought to him the knowledge of Christ. He was doing the best that he knew. He believed in God the Father. He prayed to Him. He believed that he ought to use his wealth to the honor of God. God had mercy upon his earnest seeking soul. He sent Peter to show him a more excellent way. Through the ministration of the apostle he opened his heart to know Jesus Christ. The soil was already prepared. It took no long argument to convince Cornelius. He found the pearl of great price and laid hold on it. **“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself”** (John 7:17). When the seed falls upon good ground it grows up quickly and produces a splendid harvest.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE DO GOD’S WILL AT ONCE

When Cornelius was directed to send men to Joppa he obeyed without hesitation. God used the human instrument as He usually does. If the Roman centurion had doubted and delayed we have no assurance that he would have had another opportunity: **“To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts”** (Hebrews 4:7). The world is full of nominal disciples of Christ who do not obey the Lord’s commands with promptness. Many a messenger has regretted his delay in bearing the message when he has seen what the cost has been. Many a man who has had an opportunity to receive a message from God’s messengers has regretted in his dying hour, with a grief that could not be satisfied, that he had not accepted the Gospel at an acceptable time. Many such have departed this life with a look of despair and with the fearful lament, “It is too late!”

Mr. A.E. Michener said: “In a town where I lived there resided a man of avowed atheistic principles. He was possessed of more than ordinary intelligence, was well educated, and a very entertaining talker. His influence was far-reaching, as he was a man of good morals and free heart, always willing to extend a helping hand to those in need. He became ill and was likely to die. Then he found his principles were not sufficient to meet his need. A message was sent asking me to call. Not knowing the serious nature of his illness, I told the messenger that I would call the next day. On calling the next day I found to my horror that he had watched nearly all day for my coming; but his strength had failed and he could not talk or listen. His extremity was my opportunity, but lost.”

TO GROW IN KNOWLEDGE WE MUST BE TAUGHT

If we are to grow in the knowledge of God we must be ready to be taught. Cornelius was ready to be taught. He was an officer in the army. He might have refused to accept the companionship and instruction of humble men. He was not of that type.

He was willing to undergo expense and effort in order to learn more of God.

Men are often ready to go to a great deal of expense to learn a profession or trade that will bring them in larger returns. They will work hard, they will study late in order to make more money or to receive greater honor. But few are ready to spend and be spent in order that they may grow in the knowledge of God. The business colleges and the law schools are crowded, but the theological seminaries are poorly attended. Parents are willing to buy books which will help to entertain their children, but most of them assert that it costs too much to purchase books which will feed their souls. It is well for that child of God who has a longing to be taught and a hunger to learn more of the deep things of God if he is willing to expend time and money in order that he may receive religious instruction. That Christian is blessed who yearns for a clearer knowledge of the way of life.

WE NEED A LARGER VISION

We need a larger vision of the love of God. If we, like Peter, have a narrow vision of the love of God we must get a larger vision before we are properly fitted for Christ's service. When the Lord showed Peter the vessel filled with all manner of unclean beasts and birds, and was told to eat, he at first refused. The Lord taught him that no man is common or unclean. The race to which a man belongs does not separate him from God.

We condemn vigorously what we call the narrow Jewish view. But may we not as Anglo-Saxons feel that we are somewhat superior in the sight of God and that we are likely to be granted special favors because we are such. I was reading recently of a missionary who was asked to pray for a certain definite object by a Christian native. He prayed before asking the native Christian to pray. He said, "Haven't you felt as I felt that somehow our prayers are somewhat superior in the sight of God. But when I had finished," he continues, "I asked the native Christian to pray. And then I felt as if my prayer and my faith were as nothing beside his. He came to God in a simple, earnest manner and with a child-like faith that put me to shame." God may often hear the prayers which ascend from the dark man of India when our shallow prayers are but as chaff in his sight.

In one of the largest cities of this country, a few years ago, on the west side of the city, a German couple kept a bar. One day the proprietor's wife was ill and complaining. Some black people were holding meetings on the other side of the street. The bar tender suggested to the wife of the proprietor that she go over and let the "black persons" pray for her. She answered, "I believe I will."

She went over and they prayed for her and pleaded with her to accept Christ as her Saviour. She was led to accept her Saviour, and in Him she found peace and contentment. After that she would tell what the Lord had done for her. She would sit down with the men at the tables and tell them of the love of Christ and urge them to accept him. After a while her husband was converted and they gave up the business and become members of one of the churches of that city. Those who had reached that woman's heart were humble black brethren holding meetings in a tent.

They loved the same Saviour whom Peter loved. Their hearts glowed with the love of Christ just as truly as though their faces were white, and their faith and prayers reached the throne of God and worked wonders in the hearts of those to whom they preached. All races, all nationalities, if saved at all, are saved by the same Christ and in the same way that the Italian, Cornelius, was saved.

GOD HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND REVEALED TRUTH

God by His providence helps us to understand His revealed truth: **“Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simons house, and stood before the gate, And called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there. While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee”** (10:17-19).

When Peter had seen the vision he was puzzled as to its meaning. While he was trying to fathom its meaning the three messengers from Cornelius came and inquired for him. Then he heard their report of what God had revealed to Cornelius. The Spirit of God assured him he should go with these men. He went at once though he did not yet fully understand, but before the next two days had passed, God taught him by His providence, the meaning of the vision and His will concerning the Gentiles.

Very often God, in His providence, helps us to understand His Word.

- He chastens us and we can understand better what His comfort means.
- He calls away a loved one from a bed of suffering and we understand better what the rest of Heaven is.
- He shakes the earth and causes terrible destruction and we can understand better what the terror of the wicked will be when they shall call upon the mountains and hills to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of Heaven's KING.
- He sends famine and we can understand better the love of God in sending the rain and the fruits in their season.
- He allows us to witness the death of the unbeliever and the terror of his last hours and he teaches us to understand better the fearful end and the everlasting suffering of the wicked.
- He enables us to pass through a period of reviving in the church in order that we may have a better appreciation of the joy there is in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth.

God is teaching us constantly, if we will but open our eyes to look, if we will but lend our ears to hear, more and more of the meaning of His revealed will as He has given it to us in His Word.

THOSE INTERESTED WILL INTEREST THEIR FRIENDS

If we are really interested in the Gospel we will try to gather our friends to hear it preached. Cornelius called together his relatives and near friends to hear Peter. They heard his sermon; they found Christ and a remarkable blessing from the Holy Spirit.

If there is something unusual going on in our community, some special demonstration, some interesting lecture, some choice entertainment, some remarkable natural phenomena to be observed, we call our friends and relatives. We entreat them to come and see or to come and hear. I have known a family to make a large effort to call in their neighbors to see a special flower which was blooming in their house. Do we make the same effort to enthuse them about the prayer meeting? Are we just as eager to show men the beauty of the Saviour who has come into our hearts and has been to us the one altogether lovely? We are delighted to show our friends a gold nugget which a friend has brought from the gold field, but we are silent about the Word which is more precious than gold. May God give us the earnestness of the Roman centurion so that we may enlist the attention of our relatives and friends in the reading and preaching of the Gospel of Christ!

GOD PREPARES BOTH SPEAKER AND SEEKER

God prepares the message of the speaker to suit the heart of the seeker. Cornelius and Peter were thirty miles apart yet God prepared each for the other. He prepared Peter to speak to Cornelius and Cornelius to hear the message of Peter. God prepared Saul to receive Ananias. He also prepared Ananias to go to Saul.

It is well to remember that it is necessary that God shall prepare at both ends of the line. We need to be prepared to speak the right word, but it is also necessary that God shall prepare the heart to receive the Word which we speak. I remember hearing Dr. R.A. Torrey tell of a drunken man from the east who was in Chicago one night when he was preaching there. Dr. Torrey was led to pray that night that if there was anyone there who had come from the east, from New York or any other eastern city, and had left his family and come there to drink himself away that God would come into his heart and make it new. He said he had never prayed a prayer like that before or afterward, but there was a man there that night whom the prayer just fitted and it went like an arrow to his heart and he yielded to Christ. Afterward that same man became an earnest worker in the church. God had led him so to pray and He had led the man to the place where he would hear the prayer which, all unknown to Dr. Torrey, was just fitted to the man's needs.

GOD KNOWS NO RACIAL OR NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

God knows no racial or national boundaries in saving men or in conferring upon them power. On the Gentiles was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was a wonderful revelation to Peter and the other Jews who were with him. There was a fourfold barrier between Peter and Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman; he was a soldier; he was an officer and he was a Gentile. One might think that here was a man who could never get past all of those barriers. After we have seen the conversion of Saul and the conversion of Cornelius shall we think that there is anything too hard for the Lord? Some of the most faithful members of the Christian church today are the native Christians of China and India and Africa and the New Hebrides Islands. John G. Paton, speaks of how his elders worked when he was absent, to keep up the schools and all the work and worship of the church. He said that he wondered how many of the elders of the church at home had been as faithful and devoted to the Lord's work. And these elders had, only a few years before, been heathen cannibals, men of most brutal habits and darkened hearts.

The power to transform the hearts of men is not in us, no matter what may be our color or our training, but in the Spirit of God. He can and He does save the most hardened men. He can and He does use the weakest and most lowly of men to do a mighty work for Him.

THE ORDINANCES ARE FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

The Lord expects all of His disciples to observe the sacraments: **“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days”** (10:47-48). Peter could see no possible reason to exclude the Gentiles from the ordinance of baptism. By this he evidently meant to receive them into full fellowship in the church. They would then be eligible to receive the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus had given the command to His disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature and to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Peter had not at first grasped the full meaning of that command. He had come, at this time, to see in it a depth and breadth that he had never seen before. Peter had helped to confer the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans. Now he witnessed, without any laying on of hands by himself or any special act which would indicate that he was responsible for it, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles. As surely as the Holy Spirit came upon the Jews directly from Heaven, so He came upon the Gentiles directly from Heaven. There was no argument left. The old wall of partition between Hebrew and Gentile was broken down and all who believed on Christ and were ready to serve Him could be admitted on equal terms. It will be a blessed day indeed when all professed followers of Christ shall learn the lesson with which Peter began his first sermon to the Gentiles, **“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”** (10:34-35).

QUESTIONS (Acts 10:1-48)

1. With what two men is this paragraph mainly concerned?
2. Why is there a problem about getting these two men together?
3. Who was Cornelius?
4. What was his character?
5. How was he prepared for receiving Peter?
6. How was Peter prepared for receiving Peter?
7. What do these divine communications show about God’s intimate knowledge of the actions and thoughts of men?
8. What was the vision which Peter saw?
9. What is the meaning of the vision?
10. Do we need a larger vision of the love of God?
11. How many men went to Caesarea with Peter? Of what value were witnesses?
12. What shows that Cornelius welcomed them?
13. If we are really interested in the Gospel will we try to gather our friends to hear it preached?
14. Point out the correspondence between Peter’s sermon here and at Pentecost?

15. Why did not Peter finish his sermon?
16. How did the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Gentiles compare with that at Pentecost?
17. What effect did this have upon the Jewish witnesses?
18. What indicates that the Gentiles were admitted into the church?
19. What does this teach us about racial and national boundaries in their relation to the Christian religion?
20. Will you repeat verses thirty-four and thirty-five?

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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