

SEVEN SAVED SINNERS

Or How God Saves Men

A study of God's Varieties of Religious Experiences in the Book of Acts

by

William Ward Ayer, D. D.

Copyright © 1937

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS

THE STUDY

Acts 10

The Occasion

Here is a long and fascinating story which should be read and studied with care. There is a subtle intermingling of the natural and supernatural which we believe normally accompanies conversion. The supernatural is not as clearly seen and comprehended, today, as in those days of “**open vision**”; but for those who have eyes to see, it is present in all true conversion. As in Chapter eight, we have here a prepared subject and agent, but in entirely different ways.

The Subject

Cornelius was a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea, in Palestine, and reputed to have been of a distinguished Roman family. He was probably a Jewish proselyte, but not a full proselyte. There is a real distinction between the two. Full proselytes of Judaism were such as submitted themselves entirely to the rites and ordinances of the Jews, were circumcised, and thereby entered into all the privileges of the covenant people. It is apparent that Cornelius was not one of these. It has been suggested that he was a “proselyte of the gate.” Of course, in the thinking and attitude of the Jews, such an one was still a Gentile and vastly inferior. It is evident that he was a religious man, devout, fearing God, giving much alms, and praying to God always. His faith in God is manifested supremely in his prayer life. When a man prays, he certainly has some faith in God.

The Agent

The Apostle Peter is God's instrument here. He is making the second use of the keys of the Kingdom, the first use of which he made on the day of Pentecost, opening up the Gospel to the Jews. Now, in the household of Cornelius, he is bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles.

God's preparation of Peter should be studied with care. The removal of Jewish bigotry by means of the vision of the unclean things and the statement, "**What God has cleansed that call not thou common.**" Peter's method of approach to Cornelius and the other Gentiles is also worthy of careful study.

The Accompaniments

The supernatural predominates to the close of the transaction. There are visions, tongues, and other divine demonstrations. In the midst of all the outward manifestations, however, the student must note the normal procedure in conversion. The Word is preached, believed, and the Spirit's regenerating power comes in answer to faith.

Results

The immediate results are the conversion of Cornelius and his household. The far-reaching results include the opening of the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Peter doubtless thought that this turning aside to the Gentiles was a mere innovation, an interlude on the part of God. Little did he realize that this door was to swing wide to the great Gentile nations, and that, eventually, the Gentiles would make up the major portion of the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, while the Jews would turn aside from the Gospel in unbelief.

Significant Lessons

Racial differences should never be a deterrent to personal soul winning, and there should be no adaptation of the Gospel to please the worldly prominent. The gist of Peter's message is the same as that which he preached on the day of Pentecost to the Jews. Note, however, that there is no condemnation of the Gentiles.

- The Jews are held accountable for the crucifixion of Jesus;
- The Gentiles are accountable only for rejecting His mercy.

Here is a type of the power used in winning big men. Note, however, that human shrewdness was not used by Peter, but the wisdom of God in the Gospel. The choosing of keymen is God's prerogative, not ours. Preaching the Gospel to them is our privilege.

THE SERMON

CAN A RELIGIOUS MAN BE SAVED?

Acts 10

If in all the world, there can be found a single man who does not need Jesus Christ and His Gospel, then Christianity collapses. This is a startling statement, and yet I challenge any who have long desired to put Christianity out of business to bring one man who is without sin—one man who does not need salvation.

The presence of that man will disprove the fundamental claims of Christianity and put it out of existence; and every honest preacher will have to quit his job and seek some other way of earning a living!

You may ask—why is that? My reply is that Christianity presupposes a lost world. It declares boldly that **“all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.”**

- Jesus declared He came to **“seek and to save that which was lost.”**
- Paul says, **“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,”** and **“there is none righteous, no, not one.”**
- John says, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and, if we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar.”**

Now this is a hard pill for the world to swallow, because of its pride and self-sufficiency, because of the boast of human achievement, and the evolutionary philosophy that claims man is slowly but surely advancing to perfection, and that he needs not so much a Saviour as someone to give him a start along the pathway of his progress.

We are brought face to face in this study with the doctrine of total depravity.

This is the doctrine of which little has been heard in the preachments of the Church in recent years. But the condition of men's hearts which calls forth a statement of the doctrine has not changed. The fact of the matter is, that condition has been intensified with the passing of the years.

By the doctrine of total depravity, we mean that the sinner is totally destitute of that love to God which constitutes the fundamental and all-inclusive demand of the law; that all of his tendencies and dispositions are toward sin and not toward righteousness. The sinner is possessed of an aversion to God which, though not always apparent, nevertheless is in God's sight active enmity, and it is manifest at least as soon as God's will comes into conflict with his own.

Every spiritually minded student of human nature knows that sinful man has a corrupted faculty and does not evolve toward perfection, but rather has constant progress in depravity, and he has no recuperative powers of his own, but waits for the power of God in regeneration to change his nature. It is a part of the belligerent apostasy of our day to deny and scoff at this doctrine of human depravity.

The late Dr. W. H. P. Faunce, former President of Brown University, made this statement: **“Those who believe in total depravity must be unfortunate in their friends.”**

And his statement manifests a tendency in the Church today. Preachers are giving their people “sugar and spice and everything nice”; our theology, today, has become, as someone has said, a “lavender-water” theology, and there is no blood in it nor any power, nor any condemnation of sin.

Now let us not make a mistake; by total depravity, we do not mean that men are as bad as they can be, nor that they have done, in their natural condition, all that they could do for evil. Most men possess certain amiable qualities; many unsaved men have high virtues according to human standards.

By total depravity we mean that a sinful condition affects the whole man—intellect, feeling, heart, and will, and that, until the love of God comes into his heart by regeneration, he is destitute of that love, and has no ability to do anything to please God.

A watch does not need to have every wheel and part of its mechanism destroyed in order to be rendered useless; it is totally useless when its main spring is broken—when it fails to tell time; in other words, when it fails to function in the realm and for the purpose for which it was created. This is man's condition under sin. The Gospel is a startling thing; it makes people less religious and more righteous. The depraved man is oftentimes very religious, but his religion is an abomination to God. The Gospel makes him righteous, with the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed and imparted unto him.

Now here's Cornelius, who apparently did not need the Gospel. The Scriptures declare that 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.”** That's a testimony worthy of consideration. I declare to you that eighty per cent of the churches today would have received him just as he was; but God would not receive him as he was. Why? He was a religious man; why was he not all right?

I. SOME REMARKABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAN

He was a devout man. That means a religious man. It is profitable to study the centurions of the Bible. Every one of them was a man of high character, and we are told that this man was not only of noble character but of noble lineage. Dr. Campbell Morgan says of him:

“We know certainly that Cornelius was a Roman soldier. He may have been a patrician or a plebeian. There was a great Roman family of the Cornealian patricians and there was also a great family of enfranchised slaves, Corneli; for an emperor had enfranchised a number of slaves and had given them his own name. This man may have been of one or the other family; which, we cannot tell. But unmistakably he was devoutly religious and he was no mere religious dabbler. He was earnest in the matter. It is apparent that he sought escape from the idolatry of the Romans of his day. He saw the emptiness of paganism, and sought a knowledge of the true God. This is commendable.”

This spirit is not absent today. Men are indeed seeking reality. One of the reasons why the Church is coming into disrepute with so many is because it has turned aside from reality to men's ethereal philosophy and has dealt much with human vagaries and empty sentiment rather than getting down to the hard facts of existence and presenting a Gospel that is the salvation of men's souls and the alleviation of the hardships of existence through refuge in God. Oh, that the Church would give reality to men! We should have a glorious revival.

He was a God-fearing man, that is to say, he was reverent. He revered God. There were quite a number of Gentile “God-fearers” during New Testament times. These men and women followed Jewish ethics; they prayed to the Lord God and gave alms; many of them were called friends of the Jewish synagogues because they helped support the religious life of their Gentile communities through the synagogues which were established in the cities and towns.

It is not surprising that this should be so. Intelligent folks know that there is a God. Atheism is a fool’s faith, and you don’t find intelligent people turning to atheism in large numbers. They may not be Christians, they may not have given themselves to Jesus Christ, but they do not deny the existence of God and the possibilities of human responsibility to Him.

We note also that he was benevolent and charitable. This shows an admirable attitude toward his fellow men. Many unsaved people are very charitable. Human goodness is a fact with which we have to deal. Unfortunately, some unsaved people seem to be more generous along this line than some who know the Gospel. We might truthfully say that two great hindrances to the ongoing of the Gospel are uncharitable Christians and charitable sinners. Philanthropy apart from Christ is deadly in more ways than one.

We note, also, that he was a praying man, and he was not a mere pagan prayer apparently.

He didn’t enter into the superstition of beads and prayer-wheels and prayer-rugs of the Mohammedans. He was a successful prayer; he prayed down an angel. A good many of God’s children have never prayed anything down, to their knowledge. Cornelius’ earnestness moved the heart and the hand of God, and so successful was his praying that there was angelic interference in his behalf.

We ask again, what more could this man need? Surely Christianity fails here. Here’s a man who needs not the message of the Gospel, for he has everything necessary without it.

II. GOD’S APPRECIATION OF THE MAN’S REMARKABLE QUALITIES

As we have noted, God sends an angel messenger to instruct Cornelius. We believe this was because he was thoroughly honest. Cornelius sought God, but God sought Cornelius. God never yet ignored an honest seeker.

We learn that his prayers and alms are recorded. It seems to me that we have here an answer to one of the great problems of prayer. The question is often asked, are the prayers of the unsaved answered?

And we can reply that they are heard but cannot be fully answered, because in this dispensation they are not acceptable without the finished work of Jesus Christ operative in the life of the one who prays. The one who comes to God in the age of grace must be a redeemed soul under the blood of Jesus Christ, and he must recognize the high-priestly work of the Lord Jesus as his intercessor before the throne of grace, so that the limitations to the prayers of Cornelius were that, though God heard his prayers, they were unacceptable; and, though his alms were recorded,

they were insufficient. Something more needed to be done. You will note that the record says that these things came up before God as a memorial, or, as Moffatt puts it, “a sacrifice to be remembered.”

It would appear that God keeps a note book. God is willing to move heaven and earth for an earnest man’s salvation. That’s just exactly what He did do.

- He moved heaven and sent an angel to Cornelius.
- He moved earth and prepared the narrow and bigoted Peter to be the preacher of the Gospel to this consecrated Gentile.

Yet for all his excellent qualities and for all of God’s appreciation of his remarkable characteristics, this man needed to be saved.

He was a good man, but he was not a saved man, and there’s a definite difference.

The story is told of two men who started out to hear a concert, which both were desirous of enjoying. It seems that they were both hard pressed financially; one had a dollar, the other had fifty cents; but, when they got to the concert hall, they made the discovery that the tickets were two dollars for the cheapest seats. On the way to the concert hall, the man with the dollar had good naturedly chided the fellow with but fifty cents and said:

“There is no chance for you getting in, I don’t believe there’s a seat as cheap as fifty cents in the house, although I’m sure that I can get one for a dollar. You will be shut out while I will be let in!”

When the discovery was made that the cheapest seat was two dollars, the fellow with the fifty cents had a great laugh at the fellow with the dollar. “Say, brother,” he said, “you’ve been boasting all the while that you are twice as rich as I, but it makes little difference as regards this concert—you, with a dollar, didn’t get any nearer the show than I did with fifty cents!”

This is a picture of man’s morality.

Undoubtedly, some men are better than others, but none are good enough to meet God’s standard, which is absolute holiness. Therefore, all men are rejected. As Romans tells us: **“All are reckoned under sin that God might be merciful to all.”**

Now I know that some students of this passage will remind me that in the verses 34, 35 of our study-chapter, Peter says:

“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.”

But I am sure that a further study of the Word of God will show that that term **“accepted”** has definite limitations to it. One may be accepted for certain things, such as accepted as a candidate for salvation, but certainly not accepted as a saved person.

All men are the objects of God's grace; all men are acceptable unto God through the death of Jesus Christ, but all men need to be saved through faith in the Saviour.

III. GOD'S METHOD OF SAVING A RELIGIOUS MAN

There is before us a whole series of events which shows God's interest in man and the divine plan and program for individual salvation.

First of all, note that the angel visitor said to Cornelius: **"Send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter."**

A remarkable order that, when you think of it. Why didn't the angel tell the story of salvation to Cornelius? Well, he was not permitted, and doubtless he was not able. God's instruments for the preaching of the Gospel are only those who have experienced the saving power of the Gospel.

Oh, the privilege of it! And to think that we take such little advantage of our high and holy privilege.

The late S. D. Gordon, in his quiet way, used to tell the imaginative story of Jesus going back to heaven after His death and resurrection. When met at the pearly gates, He was asked by one of the heavenly hosts what He had done. He told the story of the outworking of salvation through His death and resurrection and of the leaving of just a few individuals behind to tell the story to a lost world; and then a heavenly being in anxious tones asked:

"But supposing these men fail? Supposing they don't tell the story?"

Quietly, the Lord Jesus says: "If they fail, I fail, I have no other plan."

Peter himself has a vision, as we have already noted, that takes away the natural prejudice of the Jew against the Gentile, and he goes on his way to Caesarea. There he finds Cornelius waiting for him with his whole household gathered together and near friends added, so that they, too, could hear the Gospel.

*Peter begins his message with a very humble declaration, for a Jew speaking to a Gentile, by declaring that he has discovered that God is no respecter of persons; or, to give a literal meaning, that God is no "**respector of a face**."* When one considers the essential difference between the face of a Jew and the face of a Gentile, you will see that this is a significant statement. It would seem that the Jew had the idea that God loved only a Jewish face and cared nothing for a Gentile one.

But Peter recognizes the fact that the Gospel was to the Jew first, for he declares that his message is, **"the word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ,"** and that this word had been published throughout all Judea, beginning at Galilee, after the baptism which John preached.

He continues on telling of the good works and miracles of the Lord Jesus, and then emphasizes the fact that He was crucified, that they slew Him and hanged Him on a tree.

Peter not only preached the Cross, but he preached the resurrection.

He told them that God had raised up Jesus the third day and showed Him openly. He declared also for his own commission to preach the Gospel, and like every true preacher of the Word he made an application, declaring: **“To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.”**

To Peter unlike many in our day, the sermon was not an end—it was a means to an end. Peter preached with purpose; not to entertain, but to bring men to a saving knowledge of God in Christ. The preacher had no opportunity to finish his message before God began to do a work.

It’s quite apparent that Cornelius and his household believed the Gospel and immediately the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the Word. Peter was hardly prepared for this and we are told that he was astonished to discover that God was willing to pour out His Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles. The believers baptized in the Holy Spirit were then baptized in water, and the initial work of the Gospel was done in their lives.

Peter, later, rehearsing the whole matter before the council in Jerusalem, tells how the angel had told Cornelius to send to Joppa and call Simon, whose surname is Peter, who shall tell thee Words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved. He shall tell thee Words! What a blessed truth! The Gospel is a matter of words and belief of words. Even as Jesus said: **“Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.”**

This experience is what every religious man needs. To hear the Gospel of the Crucified and Risen Christ, and to accept it for the forgiveness of sins and for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- Oh, the deluded millions in our day, who think that they can be saved by good works!
- Oh, the multitude that surely must hear on that awful day from the lips of the Lord Jesus (who today would save them if they would but come) the words—**“Depart from Me, I never knew you.”**
- Oh, that some earnest but mistaken and deluded soul might hear this message tonight and might be shaken out of his lethargy, and might cry out unto God for salvation.

A number of years ago, on New Year’s Day, I was sitting by my radio, on a cold, snowy afternoon, listening to the broadcast of a football game emanating from the Rose Bowl in sunny California. The teams, as I recall, were Georgia Tech. and the University of Southern California. It was an exciting game and I listened to the cheers and the words of the announcer.

Suddenly, something unusual happened. The cheering of the crowd stopped and there was a deadly hush; the announcer choked and stumbled and stammered and tried to tell what he saw, but he was so excited that words did not seem sufficient to describe what was going on.

We later learned what took place. It seems that a young and active player who had recently been elected to the captaincy of the Southern California team, and who had been playing a fine game hitherto, had got the ball, and in the wild scramble he had been hit hard and turned around; but he wasn't down, and when he recovered his senses sufficiently he began to run. The crowd began to cheer, and then they saw what had taken place, and the cheer ended in a groan, and then there was an awful silence. The young man ran on with enthusiasm; only to be pulled down by one of his own men, after he had made a sixty-five yard run in the wrong direction! When he got to his feet, not knowing who had pulled him down, he asked, "Why doesn't the crowd cheer?" And in the excitement one of his teammates said: "You fool, you have lost us the game. You ran in the wrong direction."

It is said that the young man staggered and wept, so stricken was he because of his mistake. Now that young man ran as enthusiastically as though he were running in the right direction; he thought he was running in the right direction, but he had been hit and turned around.

And I thought, as I pondered the story, what a picture it was of many souls running the race of life, hoping for salvation at the end of the way, thinking that their good lives, their prayers, their alms, their religiousness will win them favor with God, when the Word solemnly says, **"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

Oh, friends, the devil and all the forces of evil will cheer you while you run in the wrong direction, but I'm trying to halt you and tell you that the faster you travel, the farther you'll land away from God; but if you'll only turn and by God's grace head in the right direction through faith in Jesus Christ, then all heaven will applaud one day when you stand faultless in His presence.

Turn thee, O lost one, careworn and weary,
Lo! the Good Shepherd is pleading today;
Seeking to save thee, waiting to cleanse thee:
Haste to receive Him—no longer delay!

List to His message, think of His mercy!
Sinless, yet bearing thy sins on the tree;
Perfect remission, life everlasting,
Through His atonement He offers to thee.

Come in the old way, come in the true way,
Enter through Jesus, for He is the Door;
He is the Shepherd, tenderly calling:
Come in thy weakness and wander no more.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
