

## *God in the Heart of Pre-Christians • Acts 10:1-8*

One Sunday night at The Gathering everyone was given a small colored card and was asked to write the name of someone they wanted to see become a Christian. They were invited to take the card and attach it to one of several large crosses scattered around the room—praying for the person whose name was on the card to come to faith in Jesus. Mostly young adults went to the crosses by the hundreds until the crosses were completely covered with cards containing the names of individuals.

The next morning I was in one of a half dozen prayer groups where we divided up the cards and prayed for each person by name. My heart and mind were thrilled as I delighted in the hundreds of teenagers and adults who yearn for their families and friends to come to Jesus. I can only imagine what God is doing and will do to bring these unbelievers to faith!

Most of the cards had names like Mary, Karen or Sam. Some had “my brother”, “my mom” or “my best friend”, but there were some who wrote “me” or “myself.” These individuals are pre-Christians—persons in whose hearts God is working to draw them to Jesus but persons who have not yet believed.

Cornelius was a pre-Christian. If you checked his census profile he would officially show up as a pagan, a Roman, a Gentile, a soldier, a father, but not a follower of Jesus. In fact, there is no hint that he had ever even heard of the name of Jesus of Nazareth. His story of how God worked in the heart of this pre-Christian is told in the New Testament book of Acts 10:1-8:

*At Caesaria 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 at 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. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who was 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.*

Call him Captain Cornelius because that’s pretty much what a centurion was. The Roman army was divided into legions; every legion had six thousand soldiers. In every legion there were ten cohorts with six hundred soldiers each. Cohorts were further sub-divided into six centuries with one hundred soldiers each. The officer in charge of a century was called a centurion. A centurion was the equivalent of a captain in most modern armies.

Centurions were the mainstay of the Roman army. They were trained and experienced veterans with a mix of wisdom, stability, strength and courage. It wasn’t an easy job. Soldiers typically signed up for 20 years at the age of 17 with discharge at age 37. Half of them died before they reached the 20<sup>th</sup> year. Centurions were soldiers who worked their way up the ranks. They were paid 15 times the wages of a regular soldier.

The Italian Regiment that Captain Cornelius was assigned to had a tough job. Caesarea was the administrative capital of the province of Judea. It was a magnificent seaport that had been built

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by King Herod the Great and was dedicated to and named after Julius Caesar.

Palestine was a dangerous place. Rebels and terrorists often mounted rebellions against the empire or solo attacks on individual soldiers. Many of the Jews hated the Romans and especially the army and were willing to lose their lives to undermine their control of the land of Israel. You might compare it to American soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia. You never knew when things would go terribly wrong and there would be an attempt on your life.

The animosity between the pagan army and the Jewish population made the religious interests of Cornelius rather peculiar. Perhaps he was disillusioned by the polytheism and immorality of the Romans and therefore was attracted to and fascinated by the religion of the Jews. Cornelius came to reverence the God of the Bible. He prayed regularly. He generously gave money to Jewish charities.

Cornelius could be classified as one of those God-fearers. That was a technical name. A God-fearer would sneak into synagogues and pray and worship the God of the Jews but was not willing to be circumcised or become a full Jewish convert.

Not only was Cornelius inclined toward God but he also convinced his family to share his beliefs. It's interesting that he had a family because Roman officers were not allowed to marry. Many of them had mistresses that they lived with while they were stationed in a city. We don't know for sure but it is possible that he was living with a woman he was not married to and that their children were considered illegitimate by the Roman government.

All this created a risky situation for Cornelius. Jews didn't trust the Romans and the Romans didn't trust the Jews. Cornelius was right in the middle. Everyone could mistrust him. This couldn't have been good for his military career. If word reached the authorities he could have been accused of treason because Roman soldiers were required to take an oath of allegiance to the emperor as divine. That's why many Christians refused to serve in the Roman army.

But I'm especially impressed by the way Cornelius prayed. He talked to God before he was

either a Jew or a Christian and God apparently listened.

Sometimes I hear people say God doesn't pay much attention to the prayers of pagans. If someone is a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu or some other religion and prays to God, God apparently hears those prayers, especially if they are the prayers of a genuine seeker.

A main difference between the prayers of Christians and non-Christians is that God has obligated himself to hear and answer the prayers of believers who pray in the name of Jesus. So, when Christians pray to God we are careful to make clear that we aren't coming on our own but totally on the credit and in the name of Jesus. I don't want to be ritualistic about praying but I try always to include "in Jesus' name" in all prayers I pray. Cornelius couldn't pray like that because he didn't yet know about Jesus.

I believe God was at work in the heart and mind of Cornelius for a long time, drawing him with the Holy Spirit, teaching him through the Old Testament, preparing him to believe. And Cornelius was responsive to the draw from God. God often prepares pre-Christians for faith. He uses radio and TV, friends at school, an automobile accident, a promotion, a broken relationship, a new job and sometimes totally surprising means to prepare people for faith.

I met a devout Muslim man who read about Jesus in the Qu'ran and eventually became a believer. A telemarketer called the home of a Christian who said he would listen to the sales pitch if the telemarketer would listen to the gospel; the telemarketer prayed to accept Jesus as Savior. Or, there's the hotel guest who was stuck in a room with no toilet paper. In desperation he tore out the pages of a Gideon Bible, started reading what he had torn out and that led him to faith in Jesus Christ. So, never underestimate the ingenuity of God. In 1 Timothy 2:3-4 we read, "*God our Savior . . . wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*"

Cornelius was a good man. God was working in his heart and mind and Cornelius was responsive to the initiative of the Holy Spirit. He was a seeker in the best sense of what it means to desire God. He studied the Bible. He prayed. He

generously gave money to the poor. But he was still an unbeliever. All these things still weren't enough. So, God gave Cornelius a vision.

Many dreams and visions are reported in the Bible. God still uses dreams and visions to touch peoples' lives for Jesus today. The Bible isn't totally clear on the difference between a dream and a vision. Some say a vision is always an ecstatic experience like being in a trance.

I'm not much of an authority on dreams or visions. I do dream just like everyone else but I usually can't remember what went through my head. I've even told myself while dreaming to be sure to remember this one, but I wake up and the dream slips away. All I can remember is that I didn't want to forget it.

I'm also something of a skeptic when people tell me they have visions from God because I can't tell if they really heard from God or put too much hot sauce on their burritos before going to bed. A man once told me a specific revelation he received from God that was critical of Wooddale Church. He wrote out what he claimed God said and was pretty upset with me when I didn't believe him. Five years later he wrote to me and admitted that he lied; he just made it up.

But, I do believe Cornelius' vision was from God. Let's go back to Acts 10:3-6:

*One day at about three in the afternoon (Cornelius) 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. 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."*

It was a vivid vision—clear, distinct and memorable. There were sights and sounds. The

angel called Cornelius by name. Cornelius called the angel "Lord" which may mean that the angel was actually Jesus himself.

The angel commended Cornelius for his prayers and generosity. That's interesting and important to note. God likes it when unbelievers pray to him. And God acknowledges the good that unbelievers do.

At times Christians talk as if people of other religions were all bad people and everything they did was evil. Obviously, that's not how God views the prayers and good works of unbelievers. However, sincere prayer and good works were not enough. To eternally connect with God requires repentance from sin and faith in Jesus as Savior.

The angel told Cornelius to send for a man he had never heard of before named Simon Peter who was visiting in the town of Joppa on the Mediterranean coast about 32 miles south of Caesarea. The angel even gave Simon Peter's address in Joppa. It wasn't a street number but very specifically the house of "*Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.*" That detail may seem minor to us but the address was loaded with significance and showed the behind-the-scenes set-up by God.

Peter was an orthodox Jew and was therefore under the rules of the Old Testament in Leviticus 11 where orthodox Jews were forbid-

den to be around dead bodies of certain animals. And here he was staying in the home of a taxidermist! Most of his orthodox Jewish friends would have condemned this. It is a hint that Peter is broadening his thinking and is open to either breaking some old rules or living by some new freedom.

Cornelius is told to send for Peter. As an officer in the army Cornelius was used to taking orders from superior officers and immediately did what the angel said. He told his vision to three

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men whom he totally trusted, two of the servants in his house and a soldier in his century who was also a pre-Christian and a seeker. That was dangerous to do because of the risk that they would tell others and that would cost him his commission if not his life.

We may wonder why the angel didn't directly tell Cornelius about Jesus. There are a couple of reasons. First of all, that wasn't the angel's job. Jesus commissioned Christians to tell pre-Christians how to believe in Jesus. Second, God not only wanted to convert Cornelius but he also had some changes planned for Peter. That's the way God does things—evangelism has huge benefits on both Christians and pre-Christians.

Of course, we don't know yet what Peter will do. There was once another prophet in Joppa who was sent on a mission by God. He totally disobeyed and skipped town in the opposite direction. His name was Jonah. He refused to go and deliver God's message to the people of Nineveh because he was steeped in racial and religious prejudice. All his life he had been taught to hate the people of Nineveh. Peter grew up steeped in racial and religious prejudice against the pagan Romans. Would Peter respond as Jonah had? (Unless you take a sneak preview in the rest of Acts 10 you will have to wait for another study to learn Peter's response.)

Actually, this story is retold three times in the Bible. It's about a pagan Roman who had sworn an oath of allegiance to a dictator who claimed to be God and who sent him to occupy the land that had been promised to the Jews. He probably was living with a woman he was not married to and had children by her. And now he's commended for his prayers and good works when the Bible is clear that good works will never get us to God.

There's a reason why this story is included in the Bible. God was doing something new and different. Christianity wasn't just for Jews. The gospel wasn't only for squeaky-clean perfect religious people. Jesus died on the cross for everybody. The church is for everyone. Jesus sends visions to improbable people. Jesus goes after pagans and seekers and people with issues—people like us.

Jesus is out to convert you. So let me ask you, has Jesus been after you? Has he been pursuing you for a long time? Has he showed up in your dreams? Has he used unusual circumstances to get your attention? Are you a Cornelius? Are you a pre-Christian on your way to becoming a believer?

I'd like to be your Peter today. I want to tell you that Jesus wants to convert you into a Christian. He invites you to repent of your sin and totally trust him to be your Savior and Leader. Let today be the day you say yes to Jesus.

If you want to move from pre-Christian to real Christian then swear your lifetime allegiance to Jesus right now. Let me give you some words to pray directly to God:

Thank you, God, for pursuing me.

I want to become a Christian today. I admit that I'm a sinner and I'm sorry.

I know that Jesus is the way to eternal life. I declare my total trust in Jesus right now. I vow my full allegiance to Jesus Christ today and forever. I pray this in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

If that's your prayer and today is your day to convert from being a pre-Christian to a fully devoted follower of Jesus, then I have two more suggestions. First, get a piece of paper and write down today's date and keep that piece of paper for the rest of your life. And, second, tell somebody else. Send an e-mail, make a telephone call, but tell somebody else—a friend or family member—that today is the day you said "Yes!" to Jesus Christ.

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