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Why Cornelius? Why a Soldier? (Part I)

Acts 10:22: (NASB) *They said, Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.*



Sometimes things need to change. When there is a great plan in progress, the need for great change is likely to be a part of that plan. Since Adam's fall from grace, God's plan for man's redemption has been punctuated by changes, including the great Flood which ended the old world, the calling of Abraham which began the age of the Patriarchs, and the death of Jacob which ushered in the age of Jewish favor. Each change had a distinct purpose. Today's story about the conversion of Cornelius signaled that another change was on the horizon - a change that would be played out through the experiences of the Apostle Peter and Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. God's plan was progressing and great change was necessary. But why Cornelius? Why a soldier?

The conversion of Cornelius and the opening up of the Gospel to anyone, Jew and Gentile alike, was an event that would change the world!

Prophecy quietly revealed the coming of this event. Here was a glimpse of the mission of Jesus: **Isaiah 42:5-8:** (NASB) *⁵Thus says God the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and its offspring, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it, ⁶I am the LORD, I have called you (Jesus) in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, (not just the chosen people Israel) ⁷To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon (the prison house of sin and death from which all will eventually be released) and those who dwell in darkness (bringing those in disfavor to favor) from the prison. ⁸I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.*

Prophecy more noticeably revealed the coming of this event - this time at the birth of Jesus: **Luke 2:25-32:** (NASB) *²⁵And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for him the custom of the Law, ²⁸then he took him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, ²⁹Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; ³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light of revelation to the Gentiles (non-Jewish individuals will greatly benefit from the coming of Jesus), and the glory of Your people Israel. (Israel will benefit also.)*

This would represent a MAJOR change in the pathway of God's plan, and we all know how we feel about change...!

Three key observations about what is needed for the coming transition:

1. The right Gentile to receive and accept the invitation
2. The right Jewish/Christian individual to embrace and announce the change
3. The right methods to communicate this monumental transition

Because the Jewish people were told for thousands of years they were to remain separate from other nations, this new arrangement would be difficult to accept. The Jewish thinking might have been, how could Messiah be their king, too?

What about Cornelius? **Acts 10** gives us four clear descriptive traits: **Acts 10:1-2:** (NRSV) *¹In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a **devout <2152>** man who feared God with all his household; he gave **alms <1654>** generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.*

1. A devout man...

Devout: Strongs #2152 eusebes (yoo-seb-ace'); well-reverent, i.e. pious

Cornelius had respect for Judaism and its Law. It appears he tried to follow it as best he could, even though he was on the "outside."



2. ...one that feared (revered) God with all his house...

In that society, the head of the household would have been respected and followed. Cornelius was an upstanding individual who revered God (not the pagan gods of Rome) and his whole household shared that reverence.

3. ...which gave much **alms** <1654> to the people...

Alms: Strongs #1654 eleemosune (el-eh-ay-mos-oo'-nay); compassionateness, i.e. (as exercised towards the poor) beneficence, or (concretely) a benefaction
Lexicon: 1) mercy, pity 2) especially as exhibited in giving alms, charity

He was a generous giver to the people of Israel, even though he was a captain in the Roman army. His character shines brighter than would be expected. There is something very different about him. If someone is going to pave the way as the first non-Jewish convert into Christianity, it would have to be a special person.

4. ...and prayed to God always... This was truly a remarkable trait for a Gentile of that time who was of pagan background. Psalms 25:5-11: Cornelius lived this way in spite of being in an "out of favor" status.

The change that was about to happen within the context of the Jewish following of Jesus was going to be so dramatic it would require incredibly strong individuals to facilitate that change.

Cornelius' heart, life and discipline were already in the right place. He already lived his faith without any hope of blessing for it; it was just the right way to live. He was ready to receive this incredible privilege. But the right person to give him that privilege had to be equally right for the job.

Why Peter? A prophecy prepares the answer: Matthew 16:13-19: Simon's name was changed here to Peter <4074>, which means "little stone." *Upon this rock* <4073>, which means large stone or boulder; the rock of knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah - Peter just acknowledged this in the previous sentence. Jesus is saying, "You are a little rock upon the rock of my Messiah-ship to build my church." *I will give you the keys of the kingdom* - the Apostle Peter was given the great privilege to open the door to the Gentiles.

A sense of what Peter was like at Pentecost: Acts 2:14: Peter was the spokesman for Christianity in the absence of Jesus. He must be the one to open the door for the Gentiles to be invited in. That would be a dramatic change people would have a hard time with.

Let us look at Cornelius' part of the experience - he was a Gentile and was therefore outside of the favor of God.

How do you get his attention enough to get him to do something radical? Acts 10:3-4: (NASB) ³*About the ninth hour of the day he clearly* <5320> *saw in a vision* <3708> *an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, Cornelius!* ⁴*And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed* <1719>, *he said, what is it, Lord? And he said to him, your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial* <3422> *before God.*

There are four distinct elements:

1. *About the ninth hour of the day...*The first element is that of timing. The ninth hour (3pm) was one of the Jewish hours of prayer (See Acts 3:1, Exodus 29:38-42) and Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, was keeping it holy! What an example of faith and humility! Here was a man on the outside of blessing and favor who was reverencing the Almighty God for the sake of reverence alone.

2. *...he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, Cornelius!* The second element of this experience is the vision itself.

Vision: Strong's #3708; something gazed at, a spectacle (#3708 is used both for visions within the mind as well as for things that can be seen in a literal sense.)

Clearly/Openly: Strong's #5320; plainly, clearly or publicly

The fact that Cornelius' vision was seen openly seems to indicate that this was an actual visit from an angel.

3. *... being much alarmed, he said, what is it, Lord?*



Alarmed: Strongs #1719 *emphobos* (em'-fob-os); in fear, i.e. alarmed

The reaction of Cornelius was typical of those spiritually-minded: Luke 1:12: (KJV) *And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. The angel came to Zacharias because a great change was about to happen - his son would be John the Baptist.*

Luke 1:29: (KJV) *And when she (Mary) saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.*

Cornelius' response was evidence of his character. His humble response, *What is it, Lord?* revealed his willingness to listen and be taught.

This is about changing your life and stepping up to a higher level. Where are you going to be in your life when you need to step up? Cornelius had already stepped up but had yet to be tested. He essentially was alone with his family and reverence for God. He had no idea that reverence would produce something much greater. Now comes an angel before him, exactly when he was honoring God.

4. ...*He answered; your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.*

Memorial: Strongs #3422 (*mnay-mos'-oo-non*); a reminder (memorandum), i.e. record

The Angel's message was a very unusual proclamation. Imagine what Cornelius must have thought when he learned his prayers and charity ascended as a memorial to the Lord, accumulating before God as a record!

Consequently, the angel's first words gave Cornelius a most unique combination of perspective and encouragement. God had heard, appreciated and remembered the prayers of a humble, pagan man and now they were being answered! Until now, it had not yet been an appropriate time for an answer, so God held them with honor until the Times of the Gentiles were to be established and then, with a swift and mighty response, God answered!

We can see how Cornelius was the perfect person to be the first Gentile convert. He had prepared himself for years before this by being devoted to the God of the Jews instead of pagan gods and yet having no apparent gain from such devotion.

He is visited by an angel and informed that God has heard him, and now he is instructed: Acts 10:5-6: Here were simple and mysterious instructions: Send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter. Here is the address. Have them invite Peter back and he will instruct you (Acts 10:32). Then the angel left, as angels always do once their message has been delivered. Why did the angel leave out all of the details?

- First, Cornelius was being called to the church. Now his faith, hope and association would need to come through the Lord Jesus and the church - his future brethren in Christ. (*Personal change*)
- Second, in order to execute such an important change of age, person-to-person contact would be required to make the change a reality to both Cornelius and his household, as well as to Peter and the brethren. (*Dispensational change - a new stage of development in God's plan from the Jewish Age of favor to the Gospel Age whereby anybody could be invited. For that to happen, both the representative of the past - Peter - and the representative of the opening door - Cornelius - had to meet to bring that change of age into effect.*)
- Third, the Apostle Peter had been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven and with them, the instruction to open the way at the time appointed. He needed to open the way.

If Peter was chosen for this important work, why is the Apostle Paul the one recognized as the "Apostle to the Gentiles?" Peter did his job - he opened that door and let in a flood of those with non-Jewish backgrounds. It would be Paul's privilege to then go out into the world to spread the Gospel and set up churches far from where Jesus physically taught.

Acts 10:7-8: Important principle: God's angels ALWAYS leave after they deliver their messages! They are not here for our personal profit or gain. Three (remember this number!) of his household went to find Peter, one of which was a soldier. Acts 10:9: Peter has NO idea what is coming....! *About the sixth hour* - noon; even though the normal hours of prayer were 9am



and 3pm, there are examples of a higher devotion reflected in a third time of prayer in Jewish history.

Psalms 55:17 Daniel 6:10 Acts 10:9-12: Why this trance? Perhaps it was to completely focus Peter on the very important instruction he was about to receive. Peter was probably in a humbled posture of prayer and stayed in that position throughout his vision experience.

Peter would be called upon to recount this experience, so a visual encounter was needed in order to give his hearers an added degree of understanding. This vision will be the lynchpin for inviting Gentiles into Christianity. The vision itself was VERY significant and attention grabbing. Peter, completely focused on the matter at hand, saw the heavens open and a linen sheet lowered from heaven carrying all manner of birds, animals and creeping things. Peter needed to both be told and to see. How unexpected and mysterious! He was about to be asked to embrace the greatest change in Jewish history.

Peter would have experienced all of the same reasons we resist change.

Now the message: Acts 10:13: (NASB) *A voice came to him, get up, Peter, kill and eat!*

A heavenly voice calls Peter by name and gives a simple three-part command.

- *Rise* - indicating his humble posture; a call to action
- *Kill* - an aggressive and unmistakable command
- *Eat* - a command completely contrary to what Peter had ever done

A command of this nature, seemingly without explanation, had never been issued before and evoked a strong response from Peter. Acts 10:14: Peter's instinctive reaction was one of great integrity. He wanted to protect the sacred commands of the Law, because up to that time, there had never been a reason to disregard it. So, the command was repeated. Acts 10:15: This would have been a shocking command for Peter, and now he had heard it twice!

Remember, God's people were historically focused on cultural stability and separateness and not change. **There must have been a pause between each repetition of the command from heaven - time for Peter to think and struggle:** Acts 10:16: (NRSV) *This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.* Because the command was given three times, it would have been of particular significance to Peter, since his Christian life was a series of experiences in "threes:"

- His calling to follow Jesus was in three parts. (John 1:40-42, Mark 1:14-20, Luke 5:1-11)
- He fell asleep three times while Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. (Mark 14:37-42)
- His denial of Jesus was in three parts. (Matthew 26:69-75)
- His responsibility to the flock was given to him in three parts. (John 21:15-17)
- And now, a three-part command given three times was used to open the Gospel to Gentiles!

Acts 10:17-18: Sometimes things just don't make any sense at all! Imagine the perplexity - Peter, while having been given a clear message, had no context for it. As Peter is thinking and no doubt praying about this, the answer arrives, for the representatives of Cornelius were at the gate...!

Acts 10:17-18: Once again the precise timing of God in the unfolding of His plan would bring clarity at the proper time. Peter was allowed to struggle with this revelation to help it sink in - to help him absorb the radical change about to take place. We will see later that all of the Jewish Christians were not able to embrace this change of the Gentiles coming in. Watch for Part II of this dramatic story of change and acceptance.

*So, why Cornelius? Why a soldier?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*