

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY GIVING THE GOSPEL TO ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE**

## **Acts 10:1-23**

### INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, while I was serving with Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of Illinois I met with a director of one of the residence halls in which I was meeting with students. I regularly sought to meet with these directors in order to share with them what I was sharing with the students I met with in their residence hall. On this occasion, after I went through my basic presentation of the gospel of Jesus and asked her what she thought about what I had to say the hall director said this, "The problem I have with what you are saying is that you are telling students who disagree with you about Jesus and salvation as you've described it, that they are wrong. It is wrong for you to tell someone that he is wrong about God."

What this hall director was expressing is the dominant view of the society in which we live. As D.A. Carson shows in his book "The Gagging of God" the majority of Americans believe that "all religions are really saying the same thing or that all achieve salvation... with equal power and efficiency.... Exclusiveness is the one religious idea that cannot be tolerated. Correspondingly, proselytism (seeking to convert someone to your religion) is a dirty word." Surveys conducted by the Barna Group regularly show that 65% of Americans over 40 believe there are no absolute truths and that over 80% of those under 40 believe all truth is relative. For most in our culture the truthfulness of anything is purely a personal decision, a subjective preference. Thus it is wrong for me to say that my preference is true while your preference is false. In this environment the most offensive thing that you or I can say is that the only people who will go to heaven are those who have an explicit faith in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Scriptures.

This morning we are considering the first half of the story relating the conversion of the first non-Jewish people to Christ, an officer in the Roman army and his household. We are confronted in this story with the absolute exclusivity of salvation being through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The main emphasis of this story is that God himself made sure that this Cornelius heard the gospel of Jesus and that he and his entire household believed this gospel. This record of God's actions to make Cornelius receptive to the gospel and to motivate Peter to share the gospel with him show that Cornelius and his household could not be right with God apart from this good news about Jesus. This morning we will examine the first half of the story in which God moves Peter to go to Cornelius. In two weeks we will examine what happens when Peter shows up at the home of Cornelius.

### MAIN POINT

**God only saves his people through the good news about Jesus because...**

#### **I. Sincerity in religion is not adequate (vv. 1-8 & 23)**

What do we find out about this officer in the Roman army? He is stationed with his troops in the port city of Caesarea, on the western coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Caesarea is about 30 miles north of Joppa, where Peter is residing in the home of Simon the tanner and 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem. It is the Roman capital of the province of Judea. This Roman citizen had come to believe in the God of the Jews. He had rejected the polytheism and idolatry of his own culture and embraced the monotheism of the Jews. This is what the terms, "devout" and "God-fearing" in verse 2 and "righteous" in v. 22 mean. He had come to believe that the Creator-God of Genesis, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the only true and living God. He expressed his faith in Yahweh in a number of ways. First, he had instructed his entire household in this faith so that both his family and servants joined him in this faith in Yahweh. Second, he performed acts of mercy for the poor among the Jewish people (The NIV leaves out the reference to the Jewish people for some reason.). This is most likely the reason for why he is respected by the Jewish people as his servants tell Peter in v. 22. Third, he prays to God regularly. However, this man has not converted to Judaism as he has remained uncircumcised and does not go to the temple to offer sacrifices and does not live under the dietary laws and other restrictions of the law. So,

while his faith in Yahweh is sincere, yet it is not complete in its obedience to God's law. He is still regarded by the Jewish people as a Gentile, a person who is unacceptable to God because he has not converted to Judaism.

Now, in spite of this impressive list of religious activities that are motivated by a sincere faith in the God of Israel, God directs him, by an angelic visitor, to send to Joppa and summon Peter to come to his house so he can give him a message. We know that the message is the good news about Jesus, how he has fulfilled the law and suffered death in behalf of all who trust in him. Thus, the conclusion is inescapable: for all his sincere faith and works he cannot be accepted by God apart from his hearing and believing this message. In the way that Luke tells the story he shows that the conversion of Cornelius to Christ was as necessary as the conversion of Saul to Christ. While Cornelius was not persecuting Christians like Saul was, yet he needed to see Christ and to believe in Christ just as much as Saul did. Look at the significant parallels between the conversion of Saul and the conversion of Cornelius. In both cases there were two visions, one for Saul and Cornelius and then one for the Christian messenger, Ananias and Peter. In both cases the one to be converted, Saul and Cornelius, engages in prayer. In both cases the entire process is clearly portrayed as the work of God and yet requires the participation of humans in fulfilling God's purpose. In both cases there are many human witnesses to the events surrounding each conversion. In both stories there is travel between cities in a company of people. The resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit are both identified in each story. The point of these parallels is to help us to see that while Saul and Cornelius are very different from one another in very significant ways, yet each of them must hear the gospel and believe in Jesus if they are going to be saved. They both are very religious, devout, sincere men but both of them need Christ if they are going to escape hell and gain heaven.

I want to make sure you understand the relationship between Cornelius' good works and God's sending Peter to him to preach the gospel. Notice in v. 4, after the angel shows up in the vision and the terrified Cornelius asks what he wants the angel says, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God." So how does God view these prayers and gifts? Is God sending the gospel to him because he deserves to hear the gospel? Has he earned by his works the right to be saved by Christ? The key to understanding this is in the Greek word translated "memorial offering". This is the word used in the OT law for the portion of each grain offering that is burned up on the altar of burnt offering (Leviticus 2:2). The smoke of this grain offering as it is burned is said to be a "pleasing aroma" to the Lord. In the sacrificial system at the temple in Jerusalem this memorial offering reminded God of his covenant promises to the individual who was making the offering. As the Israelites offered this portion of the grain offering God remembers his promise to Abraham to bless his people. Thus the one who makes the offering does not earn God's blessing through the offering but reminds him of his promise to bless his people. God's promise to Israel is not based upon their obedience but upon his grace. He chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The acts of sacrifice are reminders to God of his gracious promise to bless those sinners who belong to the covenant community of Israel.

The remarkable thing about the angel's use of this term in regard to the Gentile Cornelius is it indicates that God has made a covenant with Cornelius of which his prayers and gifts are the reminder that he has made this covenant. So the emphasis is on God's initiative and Cornelius' acts of faith are viewed as the response to God's choosing him, the evidence of God's grace, not the cause of it. So if Cornelius is the object of God's covenant promise and if Jesus is the mediator of that new covenant, then Cornelius must hear of Jesus and believe in him to be the recipient of those promises. While his faith and the acts prompted by his faith are sincere and actual evidences of God's work in his life, yet he cannot be saved, he cannot be included among the people of God until he hears the message about Christ and believes. Cornelius is not fit for heaven until he has faith in Jesus in spite of his sincerity and in spite of the fact that God has clearly chosen to save him.

Our culture judges sincerity as the most necessary virtue in spiritual matters. If you are sincere in your belief then it does not matter what you believe. All beliefs are equally valid as long as they are sincerely held. Therefore, no one has the right to tell anyone else that his or her sincerely held beliefs are wrong. This story of the conversion of the sincerely religious Cornelius, together with the conversion of the sincerely religious Saul, refutes that presupposition. The fact is that it is more than possible for you or me to be sincerely wrong. Math

students regularly experience this fact. Often a math student will sincerely believe he or she has done the problem correctly and has gotten the right answer. She may even seek to convince her professor of the correctness of her answer. However, after the professor takes her through the problem correctly she is forced to admit that was wrong in her sincerely held belief. This is not only true in the world of mathematics but also in the world of theology; for God is an objective person. He is one thing and not another thing. He loves certain things and he hates other things. Thus the sincerity of your belief does not make your belief valid. Rather, whether your belief corresponds to the objective reality of God is what determines any beliefs validity.

*God only saves his people through the good news about Jesus because...*

- *Sincerity in religion is not adequate*
- *And because...*

## **II. The gospel as proclaimed by the church is the means of salvation (vv. 5 & 22)**

I think one of the most striking features of this story is the fact that an angel is talking with Cornelius and yet the angel does not tell Cornelius the gospel but requires Cornelius to send for Peter. Wouldn't it be much more persuasive if God had the angel explain the gospel than if he sent some former fisherman dude? The angel doesn't even hint at what it is that Peter has to say to Cornelius. He simply tells him to send for Peter and that he needs to listen to what Peter has to say. Why in the world does God depend upon human beings to explain the truth of the gospel? Why doesn't he send angels around to tell people the gospel? Wouldn't that be a sure fire way to make sure that people are not deceived? One of the biggest problems that many people have when it comes to believing the gospel is the fact that we Christians are just one human voice out of a myriad of voices explaining the nature of ultimate reality. This is the complaint of all skeptics, agnostics and atheists. How is it possible to decide who is right when there are so many sincere and intelligent people giving such diverse explanations to the nature of God, of man, of salvation, of the purpose of life? Why does God depend so heavily on the proclamation of the gospel through Christians, through his church?

This is a very complex question that goes to the heart of what it means to be a human being and to live in God's creation. I want to just concentrate on what we can observe here in this passage which is embedded in the entire book of Acts. I think there are two facts that help us understand why the ordinary way that God saves his people is through the proclamation of the gospel through the church, through people. First, as we've noted repeatedly, the main theme of this book is that the resurrected and ascended Jesus, the Son of God, is continuing to teach and to act on the face of this earth through his church. We, together, are Jesus on this planet. The infinitely wise and loving God determined, before the world began that this was the best way to show forth his glory as the Triune God and savior of the world. Jesus is united to his church as our head and we are his body and he is revealing his glory, his holiness, his love, his grace, his justice through us. Thus the main way God reveals himself on this planet is not through miracles or angelic visitations but through us living together as his people and holding fast to Christ as he is revealed to us through his word. According to the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:10 God's eternal plan has been to show forth his glory through the church, which is the physical body, the physical presence of the glorified Jesus in this world.

The second thing to recognize here is that this is another of the unique, one-of-a-kind, never to be repeated events which are recorded for us in the book of Acts. This is like Acts 2 which records the first time the HS came to the church, an event that will never be repeated. Here, we are witnessing the conversion of the first fully Gentile, that is, not Jewish person to Christ and to his inclusion in the body of Christ. Salvation is not just something that happens to you as an individual. Everyone who is saved is saved into and along with and as part of the entire people of God. We, individually, are not the church, the body of Christ. We, corporately are the body of Jesus. We are a new community, a new society of men and women who show forth the mutual esteem and affection of the members of the Trinity by our mutual esteem and affection for one another in spite of the enormous differences that exist among us. The glory of Christ and of his Father and of the Holy Spirit is most clearly shown forth when widely diverse people love one another out of their joy in being loved by God through Christ.

God is showing in the conversion of this Gentile that the unity of the body of Christ is not dependent upon shared race, culture, lifestyle and religion but upon a shared faith in Jesus himself. As we hear the voice of Jesus speaking to us through the church and then believe the promises we have heard through the church we are then united to the church by the Spirit, through our faith in Jesus and so we enter into the fellowship of those who love Christ and thus love one another. This unity, this love for one another is not rooted in a shared sociology but in a shared theology. The power of Jesus is most clearly revealed as the church, this association of diverse people proclaims our common faith in Christ and then other diverse people hear the message, believe it and are joined to us in loving fellowship. As Jesus himself said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Peter and his companions, who are Jewish, come to Cornelius and his household, who are Gentile and the glory of God is shown as these diverse people are united by their faith in Christ and enter into loving fellowship with each other.

So the means through which God saves his people out of the world is us. As we love one another and faithfully hold fast to the message of Christ which we have received from those who have gone before us and faithfully teach the gospel to our children and those around us, then God will save his chosen ones out of the this world.

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### **III. Jesus cleanses people without discrimination (vv. 9-23)**

This chapter is, in many ways the hinge upon which the entire book of Acts turns. Up to this moment every Christian is either racially Jewish or has embraced the Jewish religion and way of life prior to conversion to Christ. In this chapter we are witnessing the conversion and inclusion in the church of the first individuals who are not Jewish. They are incorporated into the church without being required to become Jewish. This event changed the course of not only the history of the church but the history of the world. It is not saying too much that this event was more momentous than the fall of Rome to the barbarians of Europe, Columbus discovering America, the Declaration of Independence, the dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan to end WWII, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or any other epoch making historical event you might mention. Without this event Christianity would either be a very small sect of Judaism or it would have died out. It is because of this event that there are 2.1 billion professing Christians scattered throughout the countries of the world from a wide diversity of races, cultures and languages.

How did the Christian church become a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-lingual institution? It begins with the apostle Peter going up on the roof of Simon the tanner’s seaside house about noon on the day after Cornelius had his angelic visitor. He goes on the roof to pray. However, like us, while praying he is struck with hunger pangs and asks for food to be prepared. While lunch is being prepared and he continues in prayer the Lord sends upon him a vision. Peter sees an object like a large sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. In the sheet is a collection of mammals, reptiles, insects, sea creatures and birds. As Peter observes this menagerie a voice speaks to him and says, “Kill and eat”. Peter responds with horror. “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” In Peter’s response we discover two things. First, the voice is the voice of Jesus, the Lord. Second, all the creatures in this sheet are “unclean” animals. That is, the sheet contains creatures that are forbidden by God to be eaten by his people as listed in Leviticus 11. Now Jesus responds to Peter with an amazing command: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This exact vision is repeated three times. So three times the sheet comes down from heaven and the voice commands Peter to “kill and eat” and “do not call impure what God has cleansed.” The thrice repeated event is God’s exclamation point. He means what he says.

Peter is completely flummoxed by this vision. The word translated “wondering” in v. 17 is a very strong word which means “perplexed, in a state of confusion and uncertainty.” His entire life he has been taught, on the

basis of Leviticus 11 which is part of the law which God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai that none of the creatures in the sheet could be eaten. Now, here is the resurrected Christ commanding him, not just giving him permission but commanding him to eat and saying God has made these animals clean. How can it be that God's eternal word has been abrogated, nullified? How can Jesus, the Son of God, change his mind? Why would God do this? Does this not call into question his own integrity and faithfulness? How are the people of God to distinguish themselves from the Gentile nations without following these laws? It is a well-established fact that one of the primary purposes of these dietary laws was to keep God's people from mingling with the Gentile nations. If you cannot share a meal with someone it is very difficult to become their intimate friend.

While Peter is sitting on the roof perplexed the three Gentile men that Cornelius the Gentile sent to get him show up at the gate and begin to inquire as to whether or not Peter was here. This is no mere coincidence. God has ordained their arrival and the conclusion of the vision to occur at the same time. We know this because now the HS speaks to Peter and tells him that there are three men looking for him and he is not to hesitate to go with them. That word translated "do not hesitate" is literally "do not discriminate" to go with them. In that word we discover the meaning of the vision. The coming of Jesus into the world to obey God's law and to die for the sins of his people has changed everything because he is the fulfillment of the law. He is what the entire OT law was always talking about and so now that he has come the conditions upon which people are included in the people of God are not these external rituals but rather faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is the distinguishing mark of the people of God, not religious performance. God tells Peter to not discriminate between men in the same way he has commanded him not to discriminate between animals for food. God does not prefer that we eat one kind of animal over another and he does not prefer to save one kind of person over another. All food is acceptable to God and all people are acceptable to God, both through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is as Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 7 it is not food that makes people unclean but sin. Thus what you eat cannot affect your standing with God but only whether or not you have trusted in Christ as your sin-bearer and the one who obeyed the law in your place.

In two weeks, as we listen to Peter speak to Cornelius and his household we will discover more of what is happening here. For now we can see the beginnings of the outworking of what God is doing. The Jew Peter invites these three Gentiles into his home, eats with them and they spend the night with him. The "barrier, the dividing wall of hostility," which is the law of God and which was abolished in the flesh of Jesus when he suffered and died is removed. It is not only unclean food that God has cleansed by his word but unclean people from every race, tribe, language, nation and religion are being cleansed through Christ. We are to make no distinctions between people. All can be saved and all must be offered the gospel and all who believe must be included without discrimination in the church.

What separates men from God is sin, not style of clothing, not color of skin, not tattoos, not hair style, not culinary preferences, not gender, not music preferences, not age, not vocation, not economic status, not educational choices, not political party. Jesus has come to cleanse all who will believe from the defilement of sin. Therefore we must not discriminate between people on the basis of these superficial and non-consequential characteristics. We must seek to share this gospel with all and we must include in the church all who believe and so love one another without discrimination.

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