

Acts Series Part 27

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[0 : 0 0] are the Christ, the Son of the living God. The Spirit-inspired words of Peter directed to Jesus in answer to that crucial question that he posed to the disciples, who do you say I am?

And in response to this confession of Peter, Jesus gave to Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Now, as we've been studying through the book of Acts, we have been witnessing the good use Peter has made of the keys that he was given. By the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the door of the kingdom has been opened to the Jews at Pentecost, to the Samaritans following the preaching of Philip and the apostolic visit of Peter and John. And now, as we arrive at Acts chapter 10, the keys will be employed to open the door of the kingdom to the Gentiles. And let's read in Acts chapter 10, and the first eight verses of the chapter. Acts chapter 10, from the beginning through to verse 8. It's on page 1103.

Acts chapter 10, from the beginning. At Caesarea, 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 is 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, the Word of God. Now the conversion of Cornelius, given its crucial importance to the expansion of the church as the first Gentile convert, is given prominence by Luke, and the account is an extensive one. Chapter 10 itself is an extensive chapter with much that merits our consideration.

This evening we are going to limit ourselves, and we are going to limit ourselves to getting to know the man of the moment, the man of the moment, as it were, Cornelius. On subsequent occasions, we'll consider more deeply the matter of Peter's vision, and the whole matter, this crucial matter of the keys of the kingdom being employed to allow the Gentiles to become part of the people of God. That those prophetic words of the psalmist that we've just sung before we turn to God's Word would be fulfilled. That those born in Ethiopia and Babylon and across the world would be welcomed in to form part of the people of God, and this chapter is crucial in the fulfilling of that prophetic vision. So there is much that needs to be considered, but this evening our objectives are more modest and limited. We simply want to meet Cornelius and learn something about him and see what he has to teach us, and I believe that he does have a great deal to teach all of us this evening. And I want to consider Cornelius and present him in two ways.

[4 : 37] First of all, as a challenge to those on the inside, and as an example to those on the outside. Now, at this point, that probably sounds somewhat cryptic, but hopefully in due course it will become clear what I mean by that. But I'll just repeat the two ways in which I want to consider Cornelius' evening, a challenge to those on the inside and an example to those on the outside. Well, let's proceed and see how we can develop and explain what we mean by that. But very briefly, before we do that, we can notice what is said about him in the chapter. We're told that he was a centurion there, based at Caesarea, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He was a military man, presumably stationed at Caesarea. It's not impossible, perhaps unlikely, but that he had retired there.

But in any case, this is his occupation. This is where he is based at Caesarea. And Caesarea was what we might describe as a new town on the Mediterranean coast built by Herod the Great in honor of the emperor. I don't know if it would be fair to describe it as a kind of Palestinian East Coast bride, but with sand and sunshine thrown in. A new town built by Herod. In about 22 BC, Herod began the construction of a deep sea harbor. He built storerooms and markets and wide roads and baths and temples and very many imposing public buildings in honor of the emperor. And we're told by those who know concerning these things that periodically major sporting and theatrical events took place at Caesarea. Perhaps the more we think about Caesarea, the more we discover that it's not really like

East Colbrite at all. But anyway, it was a new town built by Herod. So this is where the events take place. And this is where this man, Cornelius, lives and works. Well, let's get back to Cornelius and consider these two things that I've mentioned about him. First of all, he constitutes a challenge to those on the outside. Now, in order to better explain what I mean by this expression, I want to consider how Cornelius is described by Luke and beginning with one of the terms he uses to describe him. We find in verse 2 several things said about Cornelius, but we want to begin with one, because as we develop what this one means, it will become clearer, I hope, what is meant by saying that he is a challenge to those on the outside. And the particular description of Cornelius I want us to focus in on as we begin is that he is described as God-fearing. He and all his family, in verse 2, were devout and God-fearing.

Now, what does that mean? What does it mean that Cornelius is described in this way? Well, the term God-fearer is used in two ways in the New Testament. It can be used in a general sense, as it is in this same chapter in verse 35. There, Peter expresses himself in this way. He's speaking of God, and he says that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. Men from every nation who fear God. And there it is being used of those who in some legitimate and sincere way fear God, are respectful of God, and seek to honor God according to the knowledge that they have.

They fear God. They respect the one true Creator God. But the term God-fearer in the context of first-century Palestine also had a more technical meaning. For example, in chapter 13 and verse 16, we find it used in this more, if you wish, technical way, and also in verse 26.

[9 : 00] In chapter 13, Acts 13, and I think verse 26, in fact, would be sufficient for our purposes. There we read, Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that the message of salvation has been sent. There, and on other occasions, the term God-feeder, as I say, has a more technical implication or meaning, and it is describing a specific group of people who were Gentiles, they weren't Jews, but who had adopted in great measure the Jewish religion. They were monotheistic. They had adopted in great measure the ethics of Judaism or of the Jewish religion. They would have participated in a measure in the synagogue worship, though it is interesting to note that in the case of Cornelius, he was praying at three in the afternoon, the hour of prayer, but in his own home. He was not in the synagogue, but that's maybe just an incidental matter. But it's possible and likely, in fact, that on this occasion, Cornelius is described as a God-feeder in this sense. He was, of course, one who feared God in the more general sense also, but he was one who was not a Jew. He was a Gentile, but who in the ways described had adopted and was very sympathetic to the Jewish religion. However, he was not a proselyte. Now, a proselyte was a Gentile who had become circumcised and who had fully integrated into the people of God.

He was no longer regarded as an outsider by Jews, but one who had been fully welcomed and fully integrated, and circumcision was fundamental in this process, or certainly to symbolize this process.

But God-feeders like Cornelius were regarded by the Jews as pagans. They may have respected them. They may have been sympathetic to them, as was the case with Cornelius, but in religious terms, they were outsiders. They were still pagans. They were coming closer, and maybe there was a hope and an expectation that they would come the whole way, as it were. But in their condition of God-feeders, they were still considered and viewed as pagans or outsiders. They were not on the inside. They were on the outside, looking in, sympathetic to, warming to, but on the outside. And of course, this is crucial for us to understand the theological significance of the conversion of Cornelius, that yes, he was indeed a Gentile. He was a pagan. He was not Jewish. And on another occasion, that will be developed, and I trust we'll think more about that. But for tonight, I highlight this fact as the basis for presenting

Cornelius as a challenge to those on the inside. You see, he's on the outside. He's looking in on the people of God. And yet, despite being an outsider, despite not yet being a Christian, despite not yet forming part of God's family, look at the life he lives. You see, in his own day, he would have put many Jews to shame by his devotion. He wasn't a Jew, but the home that he led and the life that he led would have put many on the inside to shame. And indeed, as we bring this passage and apply it to our own situation, is it not true that this outsider serves a challenge to those of us who, as Christians, are on the inside, as we consider the life that he lives and that the example that he can give to us.

So, Cornelius, a challenge to those on the inside. He's on the outside. In due course, he will be on the inside. But when he is described at the beginning of chapter 10, he's on the outside. And as such, he is a challenge to those of us who have far greater privileges and far greater knowledge and far greater reason to live the kind of life that he is described as living. Well, let's think about what is said about him, that he would serve as a challenge for us. What else does Luke tell us about Cornelius? Where, again, we read in verse 2, he and all his family were devout. He was a devout man. He was a pious man. He was reverent. He was respectful of God. He was a religious man in the best sense of that word. He took his religion seriously. He sincerely sought to worship God according to the knowledge that he had available to him. He sincerely sought to live a life pleasing to God. In a moment, we'll notice different ways in which his devotion finds expression. But we can simply note this word that is used to describe him. He was a devout man. But we're also told there in verse 2 that he and all his family were devout. Here was a man who fulfilled his God-given role as a spiritual head of his home.

[14 : 38] He sought to provide for the spiritual needs of his family. Here he is, a centurion, a military man, a man who would on occasion be engaged in military action with great responsibilities, and perhaps a man who might easily have said, well, these matters of religion, well, my wife can take care of that. I'm the one who brings the bread to the table. I'm the one who goes out to work. I have other concerns that occupy my attention. But no, Cornelius was one who was concerned for the spiritual welfare of his family. He was concerned that his devotion, his piety, and his faith would be shared by those who form part of his family. And God blessed this concern. He finds that his family do indeed share with him this devotion to God. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

Here is this man, Cornelius. He's on the outside. By the Jews, he was considered a pagan. He was not on the inside. He was not yet part of God's people. He was sympathetic too. And yet, despite the fact that he is on the outside, here he constitutes a great challenge to us, and very particularly to those here this evening who God has given particular spiritual leadership in the home to the husbands and fathers. Or in the case where the husband or father is not a believer, the mothers are given that responsibility. But God has ordained that there be a spiritual head in each home. And here Cornelius serves as a challenge for those of us who have been given that responsibility, that it would be said of us, and for many this perhaps is a prayer that we would lift up to God, he and all his family, that me and all my family, that you and all your family be devout and God-fearing.

Cornelius on the outside, but a challenge to those of us on the inside. Much is said of the decline of the Christian church in our own land. And we are shown the statistics, and we see the curves and the graphs, and statisticians have great fun in working out when the Christian church will disappear from our land. And of course we know that that will not be so. But much is said of it, and of course it is true, there is a great measure of decline in our generation. And quite rightly the challenge to us is we wonder, well how can we reach out to those who have never heard? How can we witness? How can we evangelize? How can we do mission? And that is a legitimate challenge. But of course the reality is that if we were able to hold on to our own, our churches would grow. Even if we look at the demographics of it, if Christian families were able to be described in this way, all the family devout and God-fearing, our churches would grow solely on that basis. I'm not for a moment suggesting that that should be the extent of our vision, but it is a fact. And if our churches are declining, it is because in great measure this is not so. That it is not the case that many of us who are given that spiritual responsibility are fulfilling it in the measure that we should, in the measure that this man Cornelius on the outside would appear to have been fulfilling his responsibilities in this regard. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing. And of course this devotion finds expression, and we're told in what way it finds expression. We read as we continue reading verse 2, he gave generously to those in need. He gave generously to those in need. This is one of the practical ways in which his religion, his devotion finds concrete expression. His was a practical, hands-on religion, a religion that James would have heartily commended and warmed to. We think of the words that we read in James chapter 1 and the close of that chapter. What do we read there in verse 26 of

James 1, if anyone considers himself religious, devout, pious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. And then we read, religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Well, this in great measure describes this man, Cornelius, his devotion finds expression in giving generously to those in need.

And it is right that we should ask ourselves the question, as we consider Cornelius as a challenge to those on the inside, to those of us who by grace are part of God's family and have become sons and daughters of God. Is this true of us? Do we give generously to those in need? Do you, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, or rather in the words of God, as they are shared with us by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 58 of that chapter, do you spend yourself on behalf of the hungry? Do you give generously to the poor? Well, do you? That is for each of us to answer. And if you are trying to answer the question, then be sure that you're able to respond in very specific ways, not that we would give mental assent. Oh, yes, that's important. Of course it is. Well, how do we do so? Cornelius stands as a challenge for us. But his devotion finds expression in another manner also. We read not only that he gave generously to those in need, but we're told he prayed to God regularly. And notice also, because I think it's significant, the location of this activity. In the first few verses, it's not mentioned explicitly, but in verse 30, we do find a specific reference to where this took place. In verse 30, we read, Cornelius answered, as he has this conversation with Peter, Cornelius answered, four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour at three in the afternoon. So here was a man who prayed regularly in his own home. This was his regular practice to pray to God in his own home.

[21 : 48] What a challenge. Here is Cornelius, one who is on the outside, and yet it was his regular practice and custom to pray to God in his own home regularly. And so I ask you, and I do direct the question particularly to those who have been granted spiritual leadership in the home. Is this true of your home?

Is it true that in your home, prayer is made regularly to God? Is your home a praying home? Is your home a home where God is worshipped regularly? Is it true of Cornelius? How difficult it can be to set aside the time as Christians, and yet here this outsider challenges those of us who by grace are on the inside.

And so we applaud Cornelius. In many ways we stand in his shadow. He serves, I repeat, as a challenge to those on the inside. But we also recognize that there was still one thing needful for this man. This man, though there is much to quite rightly commend him, did not as yet, as he is described here in the first few verses of the chapter, did not yet enjoy a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

This is, of course, not a criticism of him, but simply a description of his condition at this point. But in noting that and in identifying that, it allows us to move on to the second thing we want to consider about Cornelius, not only that he serves as a challenge to those on the inside, but as an example to those like him on the outside.

He was a challenge to the Jews of his day, and he remains a challenge today to those who are on the outside looking in, perhaps sympathetic to the Christian faith, perhaps involved in a Christian community, but who as yet have not placed their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

[24 : 08] Cornelius serves as an example of one who, being on the outside, does what is needful that he might become one who is on the inside.

Well, what can we learn from Cornelius in that regard? What do you, if you are a concerned and sympathetic outsider, if that is indeed your condition, what can Cornelius teach you?

In what way can he be an example for you? Was Cornelius content to remain on the outside looking in? Does Cornelius passively wait for God to come to his encounter?

Well, no. What does he do? Well, what Cornelius does is that he actively seeks God. Now, we've already noticed in what has been said already that he is described as one who prays to God regularly.

His desire was to know God, and so he seeks God in prayer. Indeed, it is as he prays that God comes to his encounter.

[25 : 13] He himself gives testimony to that in a verse that we've already read in verse 30. Four days ago, I was in my house praying at this hour at three in the afternoon. Suddenly, as I prayed, as I sought after God, as I was seeking for God, suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, Cornelius, God has heard your prayer, and so on and so forth.

So, yes, he is on the outside, but he is one who is seeking God. He is the one who is looking for God. And as he seeks God, so God comes to his encounter. And his experience reminds us of the promises of Jesus as we find them in the Sermon on the Mount.

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. And to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

That was the experience of Cornelius. On the outside looking in, but he seeks after God. And God responds to his sincere seeking. He seeks, but secondly, we can also note that Cornelius responds.

When God does indeed come to his encounter, Cornelius responds in a fitting way to God's approach. God does come to Cornelius.

[26 : 38] He speaks to him through the angel that he sends. And the call that God makes on the life of Cornelius is a personal call. He is called by name, Cornelius.

And how does God, or rather, how does Cornelius respond to God's call? Well, we can notice briefly three things about the manner in which Cornelius responds that constitute an example for those who, like him, would be sincerely seeking God.

On the outside looking in, but with a desire to be part of God's people. How does Cornelius respond? And how does he serve as an example? Well, we can notice, first of all, that Cornelius recognizes the voice of God.

In verse 4, we have already read, Cornelius stared at him, at the angel of God. Cornelius stared at him in fear. What is it, Lord, he asked.

Now, at one level, this is a surprising response, given that it is an angel. And it is clear from Cornelius' own testimony that Cornelius, in some measure, was aware that this personality or this character who stood before him was an angel.

[27 : 50] Cornelius describes him in his own words, as a man in shining clothes stood before me. It is Luke who identifies him as an angel. But it would seem that Cornelius himself was conscious that the one before him was an angel.

And yet, though he recognizes that the one before him is an angel, interesting the response that he gives. What is it, Lord? It's not that Cornelius thinks that this angel before him is the Lord, but he does recognize that it is the Lord who is speaking through the angel.

He recognizes that it is God who is speaking. He recognizes that the message that has been brought to him is a message from God brought through the angel.

And he recognizes the voice of God. And I wonder, what about you? If you are one who is on the outside looking in, as God would speak to you, as he does speak to you, do you recognize his voice?

Are you listening? Or does he speak, but you fail to hear? Now you might say, well, if an angel spoke to me, I would certainly sit up and take notice.

[29 : 01] If an angel appeared to me in a vision, you can be sure I would be attentive to what he had to say. Well, what is an angel other than a messenger of God?

What is an angel other than one who brings the word of God, a message from God? And as that is what an angel is, there is a very real sense in which the preachers of the gospel, though they are not angels, are performing an angelic function in bringing a message from God.

And so this evening, God is speaking through the message that is proclaimed. Will you, like Cornelius, hear the voice of God?

And if it is your response, well, I don't hear him saying anything to me, perhaps the question I would ask, are you like Cornelius, seeking him regularly?

Cornelius hears the voice of God, but as we've already noted, this voice comes to him, this message comes to him in the context of his seeking after God. And it is there that God makes himself known to Cornelius.

[30 : 13] He recognizes the voice of God, but secondly, we can note that he fears the voice of God. In verse 4, we read, Cornelius stared at him in fear.

What is it, Lord? He asked. There is a recognition by Cornelius that God is present, and the presence of God produces in him a holy fear.

Cornelius recognizes that this is no small thing. That God would speak to him is a tremendous thing in the literal meaning of that word.

And so, again, the challenge for us and the example for us is, and the question that would be posed to us, is that true of us? When God speaks through his word, even in this place, week in and week out, is there in us a fear of God, a recognition that God is present in our midst?

Cornelius fears the voice of God. But finally, and crucially, he obeys the command of God. God commands Cornelius through the angel that he would send for Peter.

[31 : 28] And that is what he does. And even the manner of his obedience is exemplary. We can notice just in the passing three features of his obedience.

In the first place, we notice that his obedience is immediate. Indeed, that is the very word that Cornelius himself uses in verse 33, as he describes to Peter the events that have passed by.

He says, So I sent for you immediately. Having heard this message, having seen this angel, having heard what he said to me, I sent for you immediately. His obedience is an immediate obedience.

It is also unquestioning questioning and trusting. There is a sense in which his calling for Peter was a step into the unknown. He had no idea who this man was, who would come.

He had no idea what message he would bring. He was in a trusting and unquestioning way simply doing what he was told. I wonder if his military training has served to his advantage in this regard.

[32 : 32] God commands, I must obey. The emperor commands, I obey. The general commands, I obey. Well, if God commands, surely I must also obey. And so unquestioningly and trustingly he obeys the command of God and sends for Peter.

Though he does not know what awaits him when Peter will arrive, what message he will bring, what he will ask him to do, what he will require of him, these things are unknown to him. And yet, even in that ignorance of what the future might hold, he obeys.

How often we are reluctant to take that step of faith. How often there are those on the outside looking in and they hold back from taking that step of faith because of the unknown.

What will it be like? Will I be able to live as I ought? And so we hold back out of fear. Not so Cornelius. His obedience is immediate.

His obedience is unquestioning and trusting. But finally, his obedience is an expectant obedience. Notice especially the words that we read in verse 24 of the chapter when we read that Peter, the following day, arrived in Caesarea and Cornelius was expecting them.

[33 : 49] He had sent for Peter and he's waiting with bated breath for Peter to arrive. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. We could maybe have noted that and highlighted that in the first part of our message as a challenge to those on the inside.

Here, his concern not only is what message there is for him but he gathers together his family and his cross plans that they too would hear this message from God. They want them.

He wants them to know also that it is great expectancy in that room as they wait for Peter to arrive. When will he arrive? What will he save? What message will God bring? There is great expectancy.

His obedience is an expectant obedience. We notice something similar there in verse 33. So I sent for you immediately and it was good of you to come.

And then listen to the words of Cornelius. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. Fire away, Peter.

[34 : 55] Whatever it is, we are all ears. We want to hear what God has to say. What a tremendous encouragement and thrill it must have been for Peter to hear these words.

And so I would ask of you and very particularly if you consider yourself perhaps like Cornelius as one who is sympathetic to the Christian faith, maybe one who intellectually believes the truths of the Bible, maybe one who participates in a Christian congregation in this Christian congregation and yet still on the outside in the sense that you have not as yet put your trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior and you're looking in.

Well, may Cornelius serve as an example and indeed as a challenge to you that you, like him, would be obedient to the voice of God as it comes to you through the Scriptures.

And then finally, as we close, just notice the reward for the obedience of Cornelius, if indeed that is the most appropriate language. But notice what we read in verses 43 and 44.

Verse 43 really are the closing words of Peter's sermon, if that's the word to use. We read, all the prophets testify about him, about Jesus, that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

[36 : 22] And then we read, while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The Holy Spirit came on Cornelius. The Holy Spirit came on all his family.

The Holy Spirit came on all his close friends who had been gathered and invited by Cornelius. And they were brought in fully and entirely into the people of God.

They were granted this great evidence that they too were by faith in Jesus Christ members of God's family. No longer on the outside, but very much now on the inside.

So, Cornelius, and we close with these words. If you, this evening, as perhaps is the case for most of us here by God's grace, if you are on the inside, well, take up the Cornelius challenge that you and all your family could be described as devout and God-fearing, that that devotion that you profess would find concrete expression in giving generously to the poor and in many other ways, that it would be true that in your home prayer is raised and brought to God regularly, that these things would be true of you.

And if you are on the outside, well, follow the example of Cornelius. And as you do, so become part of the family of God as you put your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

[38 : 01] Let us pray.