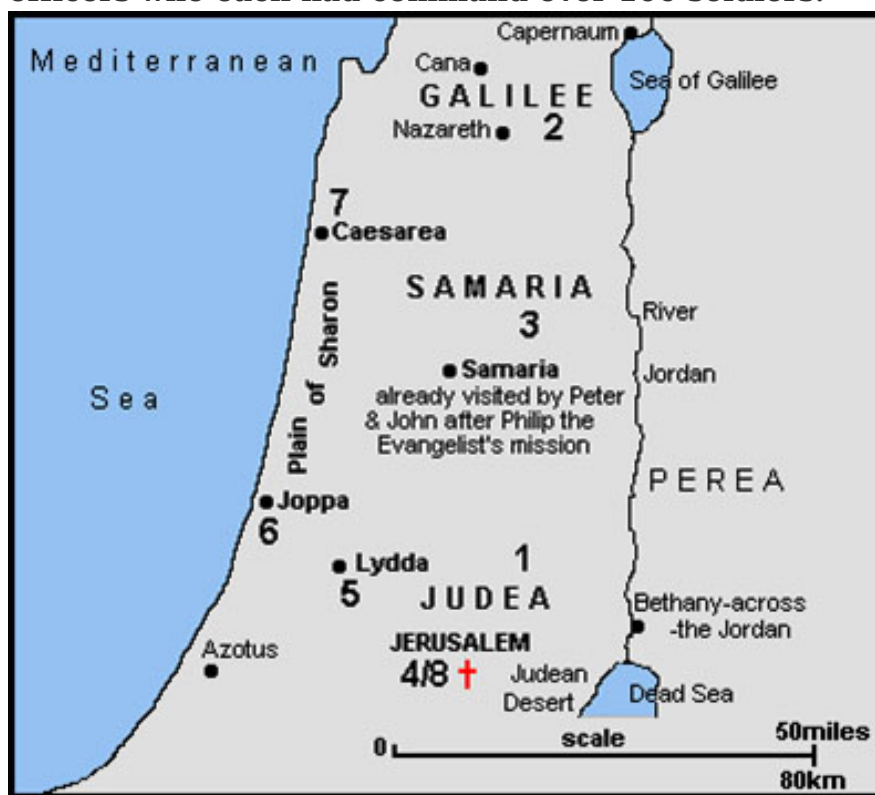


First Gentile to Receive the Holy Spirit !

V 1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment,

“Centurion of. . . the Italian regiment.” The *“Italian regiment”* may have been an elite Roman legion of some kind. Each legion comprised 6,000 men and was divided into “cohorts” of 600 soldiers each. Centurions, like Cornelius, were officers who each had command over 100 soldiers.



V 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

“A devout man. . . who feared God.” To the Jews this terminology was used for someone who had abandoned his pagan religion and worshiped Jehovah but hadn’t become a full proselyte to Judaism by undergoing the rite of circumcision. As a member of the Roman armed forces, it would have been quite dangerous for Cornelius to make this kind of commitment.

“Gave alms generously.” Centurions were paid ten times more than regular

soldiers, so Cornelius would have been socially prominent and wealthy enough to give alms.

Verses 3-16 give an interesting account of how the Lord arranged a meeting through the communication of the Holy Spirit via visions given to both Cornelius and Peter.

To Cornelius:

V 3-8 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"

And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.

"Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.

"He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."

And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually.

So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

This was the account of Cornelius' vision with very specific instructions on how to find Peter.

"Ninth hour." About 3 p.m.

"Memorial before God." Cornelius' good works, humble devotion, and desire to understand God's will had moved the Lord's hand to arrange this special encounter with the apostle Peter.

To Peter:

V 9-16 The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour.

Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance

and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth.

In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping

things, and birds of the air.

And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”

And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.”

This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

And that was the account of Peter’s vision which came to him “*about the sixth hour*” (12 noon), close to mealtime, the day after Cornelius had received his vision.

“*On the housetop.*” The flat roof of houses was a good spot to find some quiet time for prayer.



Just at the time when Peter “*became very hungry. . . he fell into a trance*” and saw a vision of a “*great sheet*”. This may have resembled a table cover for mealtimes. It contained all kinds of animals, especially the ones that Leviticus 11

said the Jews were not supposed to eat. Then a voice told Peter to *“kill and eat”*.

Peter responds with a degree of righteous indignation, *“Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”*

The voice speaks again to Peter, *“What God has cleansed you must not call common.”* Of course, it is better health-wise not to eat unclean animals, but the Lord was now making a difference between those laws that were beneficial in practical, physical ways and those laws that were essential in spiritual ways to bring salvation, the rule of love, and the kingdom of Heaven in the hearts of mankind. The spiritual had to come first, and the physical laws could not be allowed to interfere with the spreading of the Gospel.

After generations of following the laws of Moses, however, the Jews' dietary and other laws had become an inseparable part of their belief system. This made it difficult for them to associate with the people they were now supposed to mingle with and witness to, people who unknowingly violated these non-essential, although useful, laws of the Old Testament. To the Jews the Gentiles were “unclean” - to be shunned and avoided - merely because of their ignorance of the laws of Moses.

“This was done three times.” Vaguely reminiscent of Jesus' admonition to Peter in John 21 where He exhorts him three times to *“feed My sheep”*. This may have signaled to Peter how important it was to the Lord not to let the Gentiles' so-called “uncleanness” become any kind of barrier to feeding the sheep.

V 17-22 Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.

And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.

While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you.

“Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”

Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, “Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?”

And they said, “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.”

Just at the moment when Peter *“wondered within himself what this vision. . . meant”*, the messengers from Cornelius arrived. It is interesting to see how God synchronized the preparation of Peter’s mind with the circumstances of the messengers’ arrival in such a way as to encourage Peter’s faith to move forward in this new direction. God often works this way in our lives - with these strange coincidences - to point us in the right direction.

V 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

“Then he invited them in and lodged them.” No self-respecting Jew would invite Gentiles into his home and let them lodge there, especially if one of them was a soldier in the hated Roman army. So for Peter it was a big step of faith. We can understand why the Lord had led Peter to lodge with Simon the tanner, someone who probably had little connection with the traditional Jews or the synagogue because of his occupation.

V 24-25 And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.

As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

“Cornelius. . . fell down at his feet.” Despite his high standing as a Roman officer in an occupied country, Cornelius humbly revered the man he knew to be God’s messenger. It was common practice in those days to show respect for a superior by bowing to them. However, Cornelius went a little overboard *“and worshiped him”*.



V 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.”

Peter, knowing he had to lift up Jesus and not himself, told him, *“Stand up; I myself also am a man.”*

V 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.

“Many. . . had come together.” In anticipation of Peter’s visit, Cornelius *“had called together his relatives and close friends.”* (verse 24)

V 28-29 Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

“Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

“How unlawful.” There were so many laws by this time in Jewish history against

following the customs of the Gentiles (besides the laws of Moses, many extra traditions had been added) that to associate with Gentiles had become a mammoth taboo among the Jews - especially to mix with them in private houses or at meals and feasts. Jesus brought this to light on occasion: *"Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? . . . you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition."* (Matthew 15:3,6)

V 30-33 So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing,

"and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.

'Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.'

"So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God."

Cornelius recounts his vision in response to Peter's question, *"For what reason have you sent for me?"* Then he opens the floor for Peter, saying, *"We are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you of God."* This was Peter's cue, and he took good advantage of this golden opportunity to witness.

V 34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.

"I perceive that God shows no partiality." The reality of this truth was starting to sink in for Peter. It was taught in the Old Testament but applied only within the confines of Jewish society. (Deuteronomy 10:17, 2Chronicles 19:7) This witnessing experience was turning out to be just as much a revelation for Peter as it was for Cornelius. That is often one of the benefits of witnessing: it can act as a catalyst for personal change and spiritual growth.

V 35 "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.

"Accepted." In Greek it means "marked by a favorable manifestation of the divine pleasure". As Christians, we may tend to dwell on how much of God's favor we are privileged with, but we do well to remember that God will extend this divine

favor to anyone who has a healthy respect for God and *“works righteousness”*.

V 36 “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ - He is Lord of all -

“Preaching peace.” This would have been music to the ears of Cornelius. Because of his soldiering profession, he probably had more than his fill of interacting with soldiers and rabble-rousers, people who believed in solving conflicts by war and fighting.

V 37 “that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached:

“That word you know.” Some version of the good news, *“proclaimed throughout all Judaea”*, of Jesus’ 3½ years of public ministry, however sketchy it may have been, would have reached the ears of the Roman soldiers stationed in Caesarea.

V 38 “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

We tend to be impressed by the *“power”* and the *“healing”* miracles that Jesus did, but we should not forget the simple reality that He was not trying to impress anyone; He just *“went about doing good”*.

V 39-42 “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree.

“Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,

“not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.

“And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.

“We are witnesses.” Peter and the other apostles had the special privilege of having witnessed what Jesus did *“in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem”* as He *“went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.”* And they were also witnesses of His Resurrection. (1Corinthians 15:5-8) With this privilege came the responsibility *“to preach to the people”* the truths they had been taught.

“Judge of the living and the dead.” Jesus is the final authority as far as mankind needs be concerned. Jesus taught this very deep truth about Himself after he had been accused of *“making Himself equal with God”*. (John 5:18,22-29)

V 43 “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”

“Whoever.” Using this term again acknowledges that *“God shows no partiality.”*

V 44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.

“The Holy Spirit fell upon all.” Up to this point no one had received the Holy Spirit except Jews, Jewish proselytes, and Samaritans, all of whom were circumcised and observed the laws of Moses. This event in Cornelius’ household heralded a major turning point, for now it was clear that Salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit could be received by all, even those with no Jewish background or training.

Notice that the Holy Spirit didn’t wait for Peter to decide to lay hands on them as happened in Samaria. The Spirit was not limited in that way, especially in this case when Peter may not have had the faith for it. There was no need for delay, so the Holy Spirit just went ahead and fell upon Cornelius and household. As a result this event became a clear signpost to Peter and the Church that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not their exclusive possession but belonged to all who were worthy of it, even those who weren’t followers of the laws of Moses.

Several years later the apostle Paul nicely summed up God’s viewpoint on the matter in the following words from Romans 2:13-15,26,28-29:

“(For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness. . .)”

Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and

circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God."

V 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

"As many as came with Peter." All this time Peter was accompanied by *"some brethren from Joppa"* (v23). They were *"of the circumcision who believed"* - Jews who kept the Law of Moses but also had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. They *"were astonished because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also."* This event shattered their comfortable notion that Gentiles had to become proselytes to Judaism first - by getting circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses - before they could be deemed worthy enough to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

V 46-48 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered,

"Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

"Can anyone forbid water." Sounds similar to what the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip: *"What hinders me from being baptized?"*

"Who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Again Peter acknowledges that there was no division, no respect of Jew over Gentile with God. It is interesting to note that Cornelius and household received the Holy Ghost before getting baptized; normally, it would happen the other way round. But God has a funny way of doing things sometime when we let Him have His way, which is what Peter managed successfully to do during this witnessing expedition to Caesarea.

(Jesus:) My first disciples witnessed only to the Jews of their day, and it was against their custom and tradition to even eat and drink or be with the Gentiles, much less witness to them. But when I showed Peter to witness to Cornelius and his household, he did so, and they were saved and the disciples had their world rocked as the whole world became their field of witness, Jew and Gentile alike! (See Acts 10.)

Peter did obey Me step by step, as I led him from a rooftop in Joppa to

Cornelius and on to a whole new world of witnessing. That's what following Me consists of. You suddenly see My footprint appear in front of you, and the gentle breeze of My Spirit nudges you to place your own foot in it, to follow in that direction, and you do. You have no idea where you're going, but as you step into that footprint, you see another, and you step into that one as well. You follow Me by faith, step by step. You don't always see a definite path, much less a well-traveled road leading to glorious vistas and magnificent scenery. You may just see My footprint suddenly appear in front of you, and you gingerly step into it, and as you do, a few more footprints appear, and as you follow, you reach some far-out places!

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