

# A Work of Grace in an Unlikely Person

Psalm 117, Acts 10:1–8

Our New Testament text today is the beginning of the remarkable story of the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to the Christian faith. This story will fill the 48 verses of Acts 10. It is evident from the space given to it that it figures importantly in the purpose of the book of Acts: to document how the church, which began as an exclusively Jewish sect, morphs into a universal body encompassing people from every nation and background, both Jew and Gentile. The book of Acts tells the story of how God brings the Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ—something for which we should all be thankful. Here in our text today, as we shall see, is a work of grace in an unlikely person, a work of grace that reflects the work of grace begun in our own hearts, as followers of Christ. Let us consider three points this morning: a *gracious God*, an *unlikely convert*, a *miraculous encounter*, first,

## 1. A gracious God

The header over Acts 10 in the New King James Version reads: “Cornelius sends a delegation” (headers are not part of the original Greek text but are added to help the reader navigate through Scripture). So the header reads: “Cornelius sends a delegation.” But in the opening verses of this story Cornelius is passive; the emphasis is on what *God* does. A lot of people have the idea that God has lost control over this world, that in the midst of the turmoil in which we live, God is up in heaven throwing up his hands in frustration, unable to do anything about it. The Bible presents another picture: that “the Most High *rules* in the kingdom of men” (Dan. 4:17), that our Lord is, even now, working “*all* things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). Christian, your God is sovereign—he is powerful, and he is gracious! What is grace? The New Oxford American Dictionary defines it this way: “(in Christian belief) the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.” That’s actually a very good definition: “the free and unmerited favor of God.” God owes nothing to the human race. He created us, and it is his right to do as he pleases with his creation. But the Bible teaches that from eternity past God the Father determined to send the Son into the world. The apostle Paul expresses it succinctly: “Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15). He was in no way obligated to do this; he did it out of grace. If he had done nothing, then every one of us fallen sons of Adam would go to hell. “As in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). Death would be our lot apart from the grace of God in Christ; we would all perish in the everlasting torment of the lake of fire. But, dear brother or sister in Christ, your God is a *gracious* God, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and *gracious*, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving

iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6–7). God has been gracious to us in Jesus Christ. And he was gracious to the man Cornelius.

As our chapter begins we are introduced to this man: “Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment.” About the ninth hour of the day—that is, about 3 p.m.—Cornelius had a vision of an angel, or messenger of God, instructing him to do something very specific: “send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.” A centurion was a Roman officer in charge of 100 men—a century. Here was a man used to giving orders. But now, an “angel” (that is, a messenger) comes to him and gives *him* an order. And what an order! Send for Peter. Peter was 40 miles away. Peter was an apostle of Christ, the recognized leader among the twelve apostles. As an apostle he had received the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). Surely “all nations” must include the Romans! But Peter hadn’t made that connection yet. It would take an angel appearing to a Roman centurion one day and then the next day to Peter himself—as well as a vision of a sheet let down from heaven (which we’ll look at that next week)—to bring these two men together: a man who *needs* the gospel, and a man who *knows* the gospel.

So what we see in this story is a gracious God determined to bring the gospel to a Roman army officer. As Paul will tell Titus, “the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men”—not the Jews only, but Gentiles too. And his grace has appeared to you as well, if you have put your trust in Christ. The gracious God has brought the gospel to you, and he wants you to embrace it by faith—to receive it, to make it your own, and to act upon it. Our God indeed is a gracious God! Second, we have

## **2. An unlikely convert**

Consider this “certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment.” He was from Italy, an Italian. Now the book of Acts had mentioned “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes” back in chapter 2. Those were Jews—Jews either by birth or by conversion. But Cornelius was not a Jew, he was an Italian. The Italians were pagans—polytheists who had many gods. Cornelius was a soldier, a man sent by Caesar to enforce his rule over Israel.

The Jews despised the Romans, who had been occupying Israel for more than 80 years, since Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 BC.<sup>1</sup> The Jews hated living under Roman occupation, but in the providence of God the Roman occupation brought Cornelius to Israel, all the way from Rome, 3,500 miles away.

The Italian Regiment was quartered in Caesarea, a magnificent city named in honor of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. This was the seat of the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jerusalem/Roman-rule>

government in Israel; naturally, its very existence was a bitter reminder to the Jews of the Roman occupation. Cornelius, the first Roman won to the gospel, was “an officer of the Roman army, the very emblem of worldly power, loathed by every true Jew.”<sup>2</sup> This was the last person any Jew would have wanted to see saved! A Roman soldier in heaven—no way! It would have seemed that the last place to look for the first Gentile Christian would have been in the barracks at Caesarea; and yet there God’s angel went for him, and found him. But God’s ways are higher than our ways. During the time Cornelius lived in Judea his heart had begun to hunger for a knowledge of the true God—itsself an evidence of the Spirit’s work.

So Cornelius was an unlikely convert. He was not raised in a good Jewish home where he learned about God and was taken to public worship. Here was a man who grew up in an atmosphere of polytheism—belief in many gods. I came across a list of 29 gods and goddesses in Roman mythology—and this is not all of them!

Apollo – the god of light, music, healing

Aurora – the goddess of dawn

Bacchus – the god of agriculture and wine

Bellona – the goddess of war

Caelus – the primal god of the sky

Ceres – the goddess of agriculture

Cupid – the god of love

Cybele – the goddess of the earth, nature, mountains

Diana – the goddess of wild animals

Faunus – the god of the forest, fields and plains

Fortuna – the goddess of luck

Janus – the god of beginnings, transitions, time

Juno – the goddess of love, marriage, fertility

Jupiter – the god of thunder and the sky

Mars – the god of war

Mercury – the god of shopkeepers, merchants, travelers

Minerva – the goddess of wisdom, medicine, commerce, handicrafts, poetry, the arts

Neptune – the god of the sea

Nyx – the primordial goddess of the night

Pluto – the god of the underworld, death and underground riches

Proserpina – the goddess of fertility, wine and agriculture

Pompona – the goddess of fruitful abundance

Saturn – the god of generation, plenty, wealth and time

Spes – the goddess of hope

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Maclaren

Terra – the goddess of the earth

Venus – the goddess of love and beauty

Veritas – the goddess of truth

Vesta – the goddess of the hearth, home and domestic life

Vulcan – the god of fire and blacksmiths<sup>3</sup>

Whew! Can you even keep track of that? Imagine having to remember which god to pray to!

This is the religious environment into which Cornelius was born. Truly, this was a man who “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9)! When this man came to Christ, his whole worldview changed!

In a similar vein, I am told that Hindus mock Christianity for having only one God. In their view, that is a defect; having 33 million gods is superior! “Krishna, the supreme being, has put into place individuals that oversee different parts of the material universe. These individuals are powerful beings that have been appointed by Krishna and have been bestowed with the necessary powers and abilities to manage and govern their area of creation. They can be referred to as demigods. For example, there is someone responsible for the sun and his name is Surya. The goddess Saraswati is the overseer of knowledge. The creator of the material universe is known as Brahma. The destruction of the universe is overseen by Shiva, and Vishnu serves as the maintainer. There are [gods] overseeing the oceans, the wind, and practically every facet of creation.”<sup>4</sup>

How different is the religion of the Bible! My dear hearer, there is *one* God, eternally existing in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The eternal Son came into this world and became flesh for the purpose of giving his life for his people. Jesus is the only mediator between God and men. The church comes to the Father through the mediation of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ has poured out upon us to bring his elect to faith and empower us to live the Christian life. Through Christ we are invited to “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”<sup>5</sup> We don’t need to navigate a thick telephone directory with 33 million gods in it. We don’t need to worry about getting a response: “Sorry, that’s not my department. Can’t help you!” The God of the Bible takes full responsibility for us, his people. The Lord God omnipotent reigneth; there is no other!

Are *you* trusting in the God of the Bible? Have you committed your life to him? If so, then he has washed you in his own precious blood. He is God to you, and you are his; you belong to him. He has saved you and called you with a holy calling.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Roman\\_gods\\_and\\_goddesses](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_gods_and_goddesses)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-33-million-demigods-o\\_b\\_1737207](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-33-million-demigods-o_b_1737207)

<sup>5</sup> Heb. 4:16

He gives you eternal life, and you shall never perish. No one can pluck you out of his hands. You are secure. You are complete in him. God is *for* you; who can be against you? He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for you, how shall he not with him also freely give you all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justifies; who can condemn you? The Christ who died and rose again, who is even now at the right hand of God, makes intercession for you; he prays for you day and night. Who can separate you from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No! You are secure in him.

As we think of our security in Christ, consider the significance of the name Cornelius. Cornelius (from the Latin *cornu*, horn) is related to the English word *cornet*. The horn is a symbol of strength. Doubtless Cornelius's pagan parents did not realize it when they chose that name for their son, but in the words of King David, "The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and *the horn of my salvation*, and my high tower" (Ps. 18:2). Yes, Yahweh—the LORD Almighty—is the horn of salvation for the believer, a very present help in trouble. Jesus is the believer's Cornelius! What Cornelius was in name, Jesus is in reality. This is not escapism but reality! When you are in trouble, dear child of God, Christ who sits in glory is your horn of salvation. You can say with David, "I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies."

A lot of Christians are deeply concerned about the so-called "Equality Act," passed this week by the U.S. House of Representatives. This act would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Jesus taught that "he who created them from the beginning made them *male* and *female*,"<sup>6</sup> but under the Equality Act gender identity supersedes biological sex. In other words, a subjective *feeling* ("I am really a girl in a boy's body") takes precedence over biological *fact*. Observers have warned that the Equality Act would "promote the most comprehensive assault on Christianity ever written into law," that it is "a sword to persecute those who do not embrace new sexual and gender ideologies."<sup>7</sup> It is terrifying to consider what might happen to churches and Christians if it is signed into law. But no matter what happens, brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus is still on the throne! Our God will fight for us! Christ, not the U.S. government, is our Cornelius, the mighty horn of our salvation.

In our story today we see a gracious God beginning to bring an unlikely convert to faith in Jesus Christ. Here was a man who had many strikes against him: he was uncircumcised, not a member of the covenant people. He was a Gentile, an officer

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. 19:4

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2021/02/25/7-radical-demands-in-the-equality-act/>

in the Roman army, a member of the occupying forces in Caesarea (the name of the city refers to the Roman Caesar, a galling reminder to the Jews that their country was under foreign occupation). But God brought this unlikely person to the true faith. He advanced him to a singular honor, even above the Jews. God sent his angel to *Cornelius*, not to a respectable Jew like the high priest in Jerusalem. Here is perhaps the first and most important Gentile convert among the churches of Judea (the Ethiopian eunuch had returned to his homeland of Ethiopia). Cornelius was the most important convert because his acceptance into the church was literally groundbreaking: for 2,000 years God's salvation had been confined mostly to the Jews. From now on, Gentiles as well as Jews would be welcomed into the church. And so it is today. In the words of the gospel song, "Let not conscience make you linger, nor of *fitness* fondly dream." You don't need to be Jewish, or from any particular nationality or background to come to Christ. The free offer of the gospel is for all—"red and yellow, black and white." The gospel is inclusive; it is for all who recognize their need for Christ. It is for you, if you will receive it. So we have a gracious God, an unlikely convert; thirdly,

### **3. A miraculous encounter**

We have already seen how God took the initiative to send an angel to Cornelius; that in itself is miraculous. But there is something more. Not only did he send an angel; he sent a *man*: the apostle Peter. As we have already seen, Peter was the recognized leader among the apostles. A bit of review: the twelve apostles were men personally selected by the Lord Jesus out of his many followers, his disciples. A disciple is a learner, a person who voluntarily puts himself under the tutelage of a master, a person whose life-goal is to become like his teacher. Jesus had more than 70 disciples—men and women who followed him (really, physically, by walking from place to place, not just in the Facebook sort of way). These were men and women who traveled with Jesus, who witnessed his miracles, who heard his teachings, who witnessed him interact with people—people who were convinced that this great teacher was truly the Savior of the world, sent by God to save undeserving sinners. Out of the great number of his disciples Jesus chose twelve men whom he named apostles. *Apostle* means *sent-one*—a man sent out to personally represent the Savior. Jesus chose no women—not because he disliked women (he did not), but because his purpose was that those who preached his word, who represented him officially in the churches and mission fields of this world, be men of good character, ruling their own houses well, living out their faith as well as proclaiming it. Though the Bible provides for older women to teach younger women and children, it is forbidden for a woman to pastor a church or to preach in the Lord's-day services of the church. This is what Christ has prescribed, and it is the church's duty to follow it.

So an angel comes to Cornelius in a vision. Cornelius is said to have seen it “clearly” (that is, manifestly, plainly; it was not merely some vague impression). The Spirit of God worked in Cornelius’s heart and mind that he knew that the angel who spoke with him was the very messenger of Almighty God, that what he said carried weight, that he was expected to obey.

Now of course this is miraculous. This is the way God often worked in Bible days, before the New Testament came to be. Nowadays, the preacher’s authority lies in the written word: “Thus saith the Lord.” The preacher can tell people, “This is what the Lord says, this is what the Lord God of heaven requires of you,” if his message is either expressly taught in Scripture or properly deduced from Scripture. If as your minister I can demonstrate that my message is the express teaching of the Holy Bible or by logical deduction *deduced* from the Bible, then my message is the word of God, and you are required to receive it. But in the present case the angelic messenger delivered the Lord’s message to Cornelius directly, and he was expected to act upon it. When the angel appeared to Cornelius, he was afraid—after all, this was a divine messenger. This wasn’t like some television commercial that you can pay attention to or put on mute, at your discretion. In Cornelius’s case, this was the word of the living God.

Cornelius’s response was the correct one: “What is it, Lord?” This is a good question for you to ask as you read and pray over the Scriptures: “What is it, Lord? What do you want me to do?”

The other day I read a review of a small new book, *7 Big Questions Your Life Depends On*. The author identifies four fundamental questions from Genesis: “Did God really say?” “Where are you?” “Where is the lamb?” “Am I in the place of God?” To these he adds three questions from the gospels: “Where is the baby born to be King of the Jews?” “Do you want to be healed?” “Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive?”—great questions all!

In the present case the angelic messenger appears to Cornelius. Cornelius answers him, and he is told, “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.” On the face of it, this is a strange request. Here is Cornelius, a soldier serving the most powerful ruler on earth, told to send for a man named Peter. The angel doesn’t mention Peter’s credentials, he just says, “send for Simon who is called Peter.” And then a most curious detail: this Peter is temporarily staying in the home of a tanner. What is a tanner? A person who tans animal hides, that is, converts animal skins into leather by treating them with chemicals such as tannic acid. Simon the tanner no doubt had animal carcasses lying around in various stages of preparation, for his home doubtless served as his workplace. Why would an important guy like Cornelius want to go to the home of a lowly tanner? What would he need there?

Well of course, what Cornelius, as well as us of all, needs, is the *gospel*—the good news that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” O my hearer, you may think that you need many things, but your greatest need is the gospel! You need to know how an unworthy sinner such as yourself can be saved and brought into the presence of Almighty God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Just going through the motions of religion won’t save you. What saves you is Christ’s atoning death and resurrection on your behalf. He, the sinless one, became sin for you, that you might become the righteousness of God in him. Cornelius needed to hear that, and so do you and I.

So the upshot, as we shall learn, is that the apostle Peter will go to the home of Cornelius and tell him and his people about Christ. The importance of Peter taking the message of salvation to an uncircumcised Gentile is that by reason of his apostleship, Peter’s recognition of Gentile Christians becomes the act of the whole church. As Maclaren observes, Peter’s “entrance into Cornelius’s house ended the Jewish phase of the church.” From now on, the church will be for all people, Gentiles as well as Jews. As the aged Simeon had observed when he picked up the infant Jesus in his arms, this little one would be “a light to lighten the *Gentiles*, and the glory of thy people Israel.”<sup>8</sup> Now it would come to fruition in the conversion of this unlikely person, Cornelius.

Here, then, we have a *gracious God*, an *unlikely convert*, a *miraculous encounter*. God’s calling of the Roman soldier Cornelius opened up the Christian church—the door of salvation—to the gentiles. The gospel calls *all* people, Jew and Gentile, into a relationship with God through the only mediator, Jesus Christ. *He* is our horn of salvation, our strong tower—in *him* we are saved. Through Christ the gospel now goes into *all* the world, calling men and women, boys and girls from every tribe and tongue and nation. All people come to God on equal footing, with the realization that we are sinners, and that God has taken the initiative to save us. His work of grace in the unlikely person Cornelius is something that all of us can be thankful for. Have you looked to Jesus in true faith?

The conversion of Cornelius was a major step in the fulfillment of Psalm 117: “Praise the LORD, all you *Gentiles*! Laud Him, all you peoples! For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!” Yes, praise the Lord! Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 2:32