

## **GOD DESIRES A RELATIONSHIP NOT RELIGION!**

**Today's Text: Acts 10: 1- 48**

### **Extracts:**

**There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. 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" [Acts 10: 1-6].**

*On Saturday, November 7, 2009, hundreds of ultra-orthodox Jews clashed with Israeli police in Jerusalem over a car park that opens on the Sabbath Day.<sup>1</sup> That was the third Saturday in a row for such clashes. The protesters were of the view that Sabbath is a day of rest when "working, driving and trading are forbidden." While the Jerusalem municipality that had opened the facility maintained that they needed extra parking space for visitors to the city, the protesters saw the move as an attempt to "profane" the Sabbath.*

*At issue in that controversy is religion, a group's institutionalized system of beliefs and practices concerning their God and how to worship Him. There are as many gods/Gods as there are such systems. That is why rival religions war with or persecute others over who is right or wrong, true or false. For example, the Jewish protesters in the above story wanted to impose their view of God on others, some of whom could be Christian or Moslem pilgrims to the Holy City. But is that what God wants or desires? Over two thousand years ago, a centurion of the Italian Regiment called Cornelius had a good reputation among the Jews for his generosity and religious piety. That is, the Jews liked him because he served God in accordance with their religion. But God wanted much more from him than religion- a relationship! Let us find out more on that interesting story and what it can do for our relationship with God and His Christ.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on: "Israel in 'Sabbath car park' row," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/8146313.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/8146313.stm) ; Sat., 7 Nov. 2009

## 1. Background: Cornelius was a religious man but...

There is one street in Oshodi, Lagos, Nigeria, called 'Church Street.' On a short stretch of half-a-kilometre, there are over five church buildings of different denominations. More remarkable is that the bulk of worshippers in each church building come from other parts of Lagos, some over ten kilometers away. That confirms that church is a voluntary organization and people worship where they find what they are looking for. However, no matter what it is that they are looking for, it is irrelevant unless it leads them to salvation. ***We do not get saved as a denomination or family but as individuals. Religion thrives on numbers and affinity but salvation on personal relationships with God.*** For example, Catholics and Protestants are as good as enemies in Northern Ireland even though they are both Christians! Yet, when Jesus was told that His earthly family members [mother and brothers] were standing outside, calling Him, He looked around in a circle at those sitting before Him and replied, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother" [Mk 3: 31-35]. How can you tell who is doing the will of God? That is what this week's study will enable us to answer.

Cornelius was not a Jew. He was a Roman military officer, a centurion of the Italian Regiment based in Caesarea [Acts 10: 1, 24], a city on the Mediterranean coast, north-west of Jerusalem. He was a Gentile who had fallen in love with the religion of the Jews. We can say so because Romans of his time worshipped idols, that is, Roman gods, including their emperor, Caesar. His remarkable story can be told as follows:

### a) *You cannot beat Cornelius' religious piety!*

We are told that Cornelius was "a *devout man*, and one who *feared God with all his household*, who *gave generously to the people*, and *prayed to God always*" [v. 2]. Let us examine those attributes one by one:

- A devout man

A devout person is a deeply religious person; one who holds his/her religious views and practices very sincerely and deeply. That suggests that Cornelius was not pretending to be a true worshipper. He was not trying to impress others. He did not do it to curry favour from the Jews whose loyalty determined his tenure. He believed in what he was doing and showed it to everyone around him. For example, when he sent two of his servants to Peter (as we shall see presently), they were accompanied by "a devout soldier who waited on him continually" [v. 7]. Therefore, the sincerity of Cornelius' deeply-held religious beliefs was never in doubt.

- One who feared God with all his household

Cornelius feared God, not Roman idols. To fear God is to keep His commandments [**Eccl. 12: 13**]. Many worshippers may be devout in that they follow all the rules and rituals of their faith. For example, a Moslem may pray five times a day. A Jew may go to the temple every three hours of the day between six in the morning and twelve midnight. A fetish priest may stay awake all night in his shrine performing multiple rituals. But do they fear God? Is it not possible that most of us honour God with our lips but our hearts are far from Him [**Is. 29: 13; Matt. 15: 7-9**]? Jesus has said that, on Judgment Day, many would come to Him claiming to have served Him as prophets, and performed miracles in His name; but He would deny knowing them because they practised lawlessness in their lifetimes [**Matt. 7: 22-23**]. Cornelius was different. He feared God and he showed it because the fear of God was demonstrated in his whole household [**Acts 10: 2**].

- He gave alms generously to the people

To give generously is to let others have enough or more than they need without counting the cost. Cornelius was reported to have “a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews” [**v. 22**]. That suggests that he did not only give them material things; he also showed them respect and humility. You cannot rule a household by military fiat if you want harmony. Cornelius commanded the respect and loyalty of his household and troops. The word of God says, “He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given” [**Prov. 19: 17**]. Jesus has added, “Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” [**Lk 6: 38**]. That was Cornelius’ portion!

- *He prayed to God always*

As regimented as a Roman military officer’s life was, Cornelius found time to pray always [**Acts 10: 2**]. In our story, he was caught praying “at about the ninth hour” [**v. 3**], that is, three o’clock in the afternoon, after fasting from the morning time [**v. 30**]. In Jewish practice, prayers were offered every three hours at six and nine o’clock in the morning; at 12 noon and 3.00 p.m. in the afternoon; and at 6.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. and 12 midnight; that is, seven times a day. That is why the Psalmist says, “At midnight I will rise to give thanks to [the Lord]” [**Ps. 119: 62**] and “Seven

times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments” [v. 164]. Cornelius prayed without ceasing [1 Thes. 5: 17].

b) *God certainly appreciated it but it was not enough!*

God certainly appreciated Cornelius’ “religiousness” because He sent an angel to appear to him one afternoon while he was praying. The angel said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God” [Acts 10: 4-5]. ***God saw his heart and knew that he was looking for the real thing. Cornelius was earnestly seeking for a sincere and true communion with God.*** How could he have known that a man is not justified before God by his works of righteousness? How would he have known that there is none righteous before God for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3: 9-23]? ***God was going to demonstrate His love for that devout Gentile by introducing him to His only begotten Son whom He had sent to die in his place.*** The angel told Cornelius to send for Peter who would tell him what he had to do [Acts 10: 5-6].

c) *Until he was introduced to Jesus!*

Cornelius sent his servants for Peter who was in Joppa, a two-day journey south of Caesarea [vv. 23-24a]. While waiting for Peter, Cornelius assembled together relatives and close friends [v. 24b]. When Peter arrived, Cornelius narrated the story of how God had led him to invite him. In turn, Peter came to understand the vision he had been shown before Cornelius’ emissaries arrived, confirming to him that there were neither Jews nor Gentiles before God but that all were treated without any partiality through the atoning blood of Jesus shed on the cross at Calvary. That was what all the Jewish prophets before Christ had witnessed to; that salvation is only for those who believe in Christ Jesus for the remission of their sins [vv. 25-43].

As Peter spoke to Cornelius and those with him about Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended on them, to the surprise of Peter’s Jewish companions. Peter commanded and the new believers were baptized in the name of the Lord (as distinct from the baptism of John) [vv. 44-48].

From the foregoing, we can conclude ***that God does appreciate your devotion that is encouraged in most of our churches. However, the purpose of church is to promote salvation. That can only come to those who have established a relationship with God through Christ Jesus [Jn 1: 12; Jn 3: 16-17; Rom. 8: 14-17].*** It is only through faith, not circumcision (i.e., religion). That is why Abraham has been called the father of people of faith [Rom. 5: 16]. By his faith, he has become God’s friend forever [2 Chron. 20: 7]. That is a strong relationship indeed!

## 2. Developing a relationship with God

The story of Cornelius gives all of us Gentiles hope. But if God did not consider his religiousness good enough, even though He appreciated it, why do we pretend that He will have a different opinion today concerning us? Therefore, you need to cultivate a close relationship with God, and the following steps will help:

- a) *Accept that your own effort cannot lead you to heaven!*

Religion is good in checking your excesses and bringing you into a culture of obedience. It is like the way disciplined parents raise their children. However, just as a good upbringing cannot guarantee the good conduct of your children in the future, religion cannot give you salvation. That is because ***religion is based on self-effort, promoted by rituals.***

Most of us are selfish and self-opinionated. In various religions or Christian denominations, man-made rules have been taught as God's, even when they obviously contradict His word. For example, some religions or churches kill adherents of other religions or denominations (by guns or by the tongue) and claim that they are carrying out God's purpose. Yet, if you study the basis for their actions, you cannot find such orders, except through tradition or the opinions of their past or current leaders. In fact, some religions exist by virtue of one or two strongly-held precepts. How can you talk about God when you have never seen Him or when He has not revealed Himself to you? How can you talk about heaven when you have never been there? Therefore, ***any religion that tries to build salvation from earth to heaven is a tower of Babel!***

- b) *Realize that God has already done for you what you are trying to do for yourself!*

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. God has already paid the price for your sins by sending His only begotten Son to come down to earth in human form to die for your sins (and mine) [**Jn 3: 16**] and by His stripes, you have been healed [**Is. 53: 5-6; 1 Pet. 2: 24-25**]. No one has seen God at any time but Jesus who is in the bosom of His Father has declared Him [**Jn 1: 18**]. No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man, Jesus the Christ, who is in heaven [**Jn 3: 13**].

***Faith in Jesus can be hard for the self-willed but you have no other choice if you so love to go to heaven when you die!***

- c) *Therefore, relax and relate to Him out of appreciation*

While you are still in human flesh, awaiting the day God will call you home to eternity, it is good to cultivate a relationship with Jesus. He has said to all of us, “Without Me you can do nothing” [Jn 15: 5].

NOTHING? Yes! He wants you to be a parasite on Him.<sup>2</sup> He wants you to become His friend so that He can show you all that He has heard from His Father [v. 15]. Is that too hard?

### 3. Conclusion: You have seen God when you see Jesus!

God is invisible; so is the Holy Spirit. But Jesus came in flesh and we have drawings of His physical features, no matter how distorted! When Philip, one of His disciples asked Him to show them the Father and that would be sufficient for them, Jesus answered, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” [Jn 14:7-9].

*Therefore, relate to Jesus as your brother and friend by accepting Him as your Lord and Saviour and obeying Him completely [Lk 6: 46]. Then He will introduce you to His Father for adoption. That is what makes you a son or daughter of God and a joint-heir with Christ [Rom. 8: 14-17]. You have by that moved from religion to a relationship.*

Congratulations!

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<sup>2</sup> “We Are All Parasites On Jesus!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 12 No 31: 6 Nov. 2011; [http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_12/WeareallparasitesonJesus.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_12/WeareallparasitesonJesus.pdf)