

Acts 10:1-8 "The Power Of A Godly Character!"

Some weeks ago I made the statement that, on the whole, the fear of God seems to have disappeared from much of modern day Christendom. Indeed, a wicked, even evil familiarity seems to have taken hold of Christianity today. Well this morning, as we continue our walk through Peter's life with Jesus ('An Ordinary Man Serving an Extraordinary God'), we begin an encounter with a man whose life can be held up as an example to us of what we read in Proverbs 9:10: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One this is understanding." The man in question's name is Cornelius.

Acts 10:1-8 'The Power Of A Godly Character!' We meet Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, which we will examine in the coming weeks. In verse one we read: "At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius." He was apparently descended from a group consisting of 10,000 slaves who were liberated by a certain Cornelius Sulla around 100 years before. We learn that he was a "Centurion in what was known as the Italian regiment," and that he had authority over 100 men (for so the title of Centurion means). The Bible commentator John Calvin explains that this Italian regiment was no ordinary group of men, because far from being the best of the best, they were indeed the worst of the worst! Calvin explains that this group of men were as interested in keeping the innocent safe and protected and the laws of the land implemented in the city of Caesarea, as a band of cutthroats would. They were as a pack of wild wolves on the hunt for prey. And Cornelius was in command over 100 of them!

But why is this important for us to know? Well the reason is this: we have all heard of the terms 'peer pressure' and 'mob mentality'. The reality is that when people are in a crowd situation they say and do things, which, when they were on their own, they would never even dare to say or do. The conscience that God has created and into mankind seems to be particularly dead, when faced with the wickedness and evil in the midst of others, when they are found in large numbers.

Cornelius ate and breathed in a band of 100 men who were unbridled in their passions. And doing so with Roman authority on their side no less! Brothers and sisters, it would have been so naturally easy for this man to have been swept up and participating in this evil. And I guess that in today's so called justice system there would even have been some kind of defence which could be used to excuse him, if he did so by way of a diminished responsibility. But look at what it says about this man who was surrounded, pressured, even almost enveloped by wickedness and vice: V2 "he and all his family were devout and God fearing."

Friends, it's one thing to claim Jesus' Name when we are surrounded by people of like mind and who are all going to give a resounding 'Amen', when we own His Name as our Lord and Saviour, and declare His Truth. But it is another thing altogether to hold high His banner when the world around us is inherently evil and baying for the blood of believers, and seeking to stamp out every evidence of Jesus Christ by putting His People to death. Beloved, more and more it seems, yes in increasing measure, that *this is* the world in which we live today.

In Isaiah's time, some 700 years before Jesus' Birth, he wrote in Isaiah 5:20 "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." You see, in Isaiah's time as it is today, the world by man has been turned on its head. Righteousness and all things pertaining to a life well lived in obedience to God, are seen as

foolishness. And a reverent fear of God (sadly even amongst Christian churches), is perceived as old-fashioned, not relevant and even somehow outdated!

Well in Cornelius` example, this Roman commander in authority over 100 of the worst men, this non- Jew, we can see that we can actually prosper while standing against it all in Jesus` Name! V2 "he and all his family were devout and God fearing." Listen to how the old Collins dictionary defines the word *devout*: 'Passionately religious. Solemn, intense about one's faith'. So in other words, they were serious about their belief in God. It's a great description brothers and sisters, because if you can't be passionate about your eternal life, passionate about the One who died so that you might live, then may I suggest that your faith does not really mean a great deal to you!

You know, we have a real danger in our comfy, easy western life to, in effect, just add a sprinkling of faith (dare I say a sprinkling of religion), over our lives as a bit of an afterthought. Even as some kind of religious insurance policy just in case God does actually exist!

Well not this non Jewish Roman soldier of soldiers. He didn't just follow God in name only, he had instructed "all his family" in the things of the Kingdom of God as he knew them to be. He had forsaken all of the idolatrous practises of Rome which he had being born into which were so monstrously evil, and he had embraced the One True and Living God of the Hebrews. And he had passionately "instructed all his family" in those same things!

Again, notice that he wasn't only a "God fearer" in word alone. His faith is one which was expressed through action in real life. He gave generously to those in need and prayed. Now the NIV translation uses the word "regularly" here for his praying, but the older translation reads "continually." So this was the description of this Roman Centurion`s soldiers faith. He "feared God". He was "devout" (so passionate and intense about his belief), so much so that he had "instructed all his family" in those same things. He was open fisted in demonstrating his faith in God in practical ways financially in the things of God's Kingdom. And "he prayed continually." Wow, what a eulogy that would be. What a testimony that would be. And surely the fact that these things were said of him while he lived is one of the reasons why God chose to use him in this extraordinary and pivotable point in the history of the New Testament church!

V3: "one day about three in the afternoon." Friends, notice where we find this Cornelius. Of course, on his knees. "Three in the afternoon" was the time when the upright believers of Yahweh began their hour of prayer. Remember, "he prayed continually" so every day! "About three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said "Cornelius". Now this was not a night time dream as some of God's manifestations to His servants were. This was a "distinct", a clear and vivid revelation from God via one of his heavenly messengers. For so the Greek word *angelos*, angel, means!

Brethren, how amazing, that God chose this Roman soldier with absolutely no Jewish ancestry or ties whatsoever, who was in authority over the worst band of men, even in perhaps the whole of the Roman army, for such a role as this. In this, what we see is how amazing is the wonder of God's love and mercy to us through Jesus. As we have seen before from Ephesians 1:4-5 "for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will." Yes, as with Cornelius, God chose us simply because it pleased Him as part of His Plan to do so. What a clear picture it is brothers and sisters, that in the midst of the tumult and turmoil of the world, God is choosing and calling all of His People for whom Jesus died!

Beloved, how clear also it is, that if God has His Hand upon us no matter who we are, what we are, what we've done or where we live, His Grace and Mercy will find us. So you must not give up praying for your lost family and friends. Indeed, even praying for our enemies, Jesus tells us. We are not hidden from God's sight. He is not far off so that He can't hear us. Indeed, his angels are caring and ministering to us though we are unaware. Yes God's Love and Mercy surround us brothers and sisters.

And God's angel here has a particular message for Cornelius! V4 "Cornelius stared at him in fear." Friends, God's angels are not fluffy little cherub like creatures as perceived in much artwork. They are fearful beings. They dwell in the very presence of God and reflect His Power and Glory. And there are untold billions of them in His Armies which do His bidding. *Only* His bidding! I've explained before how people love the idea of these benevolent angelic creatures whose sole purpose for being is to hover around us unseen. Caring and looking after us so that we don't even stub our toe on the ground. Well, no. They do only the Almighty's bidding. They can bring protection and help yes, but they can also bring destruction, even of whole cities or nations, as in Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the Plains. But again, they can do only what God permits them!

Notice how intimately linked with us God is, yet how attentive God is to His children. V4 "Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it Lord?" He asked." Yes, notice the wonderful image which is painted here for us. "The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God." We see this same imagery in the Book of Revelation 5:7-8 "he came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne and when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints." Friends, when we pray, we are not merely just speaking to the air, hoping upon hope that these words of our heart might just find their mark somewhere out there in the cosmos, no. Our genuine and heartfelt prayers rise up into the very presence of God Himself as a sweet offering to Him. And then Jesus takes those prayers and presents them to the Father on our behalf, as we see in Job 16:19-21: "even now my witness is in heaven, my advocate is in our high. My intercessor is my friend, as my eyes pour out tears to God on behalf of a man he pleads with God, as a man pleads for his friend."

No, the prayers of our hearts are not just simply empty words. They are sweet sounding and smelling offerings to God which through Jesus, He incorporates into His plan for the blessing and saving of His People. And also the caring for them until He calls them home. Yes friends, God hears your prayers and He sees your service and offerings. He is not indifferent. And He is not hard of hearing.

The question is, will you pray? Our prayer meetings should be the most well attended of our gatherings, because when we pray, we acknowledge that all things are not in our hands, but in the hands of God. We are not upon the throne of the universe, he is!

So Cornelius has been praying. And along with his gifts of provision for those who are in need his prayers too, have risen up to "God as a memorial offering." Jesus said in Matt 13:12: "whoever has will more be given." God has given of Himself into Cornelius's life, and now through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God has more to give and more for him to do. But he needs to listen and obey!

Brothers and sisters, personal obedience is what God calls us too. He will have work (ministry), for each one of us in whatever area of our lives and whatever capacity, but we will only honour Him in these things through our personal devotion, our dependence and our obedience to Him through His Word!

V5 “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.” Now for us to fully grasp the step of faith which this took from Cornelius, we need to understand the Jew-and-Gentile dynamic. Jews and Gentiles did not mix. According to the law, a Jew would never sit down and eat a meal with a non-Jew. There was an absolute prejudice and contempt by the Jew toward the non-Jew. They were despised! ‘We are God's chosen people and everyone else is not’, the Jews believed. Yes that's what they believed and that was the truth, although God had always made provision for the non-Jew to follow and worship Him!

Now as a senior Roman soldier, Cornelius could well have perhaps summoned Peter to come, but of course that was not the nature of the mission. Brethren, there is always a risk involved when stepping out in faith for Jesus and sometimes the risk is greater than others. As I've mentioned before, we open ourselves up to rejection, we open ourselves up to ridicule, we open ourselves up to alienation, even enmity, persecution, and legal ramifications. And yet step out in faith for Him who died for us and for those He may yet call through us, we must. And this step of faith by Cornelius, was going to lead to let's say, even the Gentile day of Pentecost. It would be one of the most momentous times in the history of the New Testament church, indeed throughout the whole of the Bible!

V7: “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.” Dear friends, did you notice what a powerful witness a godly character has? There was now a “devout soldier” amongst Cornelius's men. So even out of this wretched pack of two legged Italian wolves, God has used Cornelius's influence for righteousness and had impacted the lives of one of those men, who had appeared to be beyond reach!

Beloved, we just never know how God is using and will use us in the lives of others. I often wonder about the people whom He used to bring me to Himself. How blown away they most likely would be to know what their influence has had in my life. Not only my life, but my children's lives, my brother's life, and as an extension of those things even your lives here today, praise God!

V8: “he told them everything that had happened and he sent them to Joppa.” This was a journey of about 100 kilometres round trip. Now you've got to wonder: what the men were thinking on their journey? Angels, visions, prayers and gifts to the poor, memorial offerings rising up to God. Yes, I wonder what they were saying to each other? Perhaps something like this, if this is how this trip has started, what will be waiting for us at the other end? But that is something that we will look at next time.

The thing I want to leave you with this morning is this: the influence that God can have in other people's lives through a Godly character. The desire to be like Jesus. That obedient humble servant as we saw last time. Yes friends, we need to pray that God would work a work in our lives for His Glory, so that through and in us people might see Jesus! Yes we need to pray and seek out that godly character that speaks of Christ and His power in our lives as we have begun to see in the life of this man of God Cornelius. A heart for God and His People.

Let's Pray!