

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

## THE CHURCH ON MISSION

### THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS

### *A Spirit-Empowered Message for All*

In the Old Testament book of *Genesis*, we find in chapter 10 a table of nations listing the descendants of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japheth). The table reveals the origin of the nations and peoples highlighting the ethnic makeup of the ancient world. In the New Testament book of Acts, we find the Spirit-empowered message of Jesus the Savior is not for just one specific people group but a message for all. Today, we will see how God specifically directed that His Story be taken to a descendant of Japheth (Cornelius the Roman centurion) just like God had specifically directed that the message be taken to a descendant of Ham (the Ethiopian eunuch). Once again we find the Spirit-empowered message being spread not by chance or luck but by divine appointment.

God cultivates a Gentile's heart to receive the gospel.

**Read Acts 10:1-8 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort,* <sup>2</sup> *a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.* <sup>3</sup> *About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.”* <sup>4</sup> *And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.* <sup>5</sup> *And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.* <sup>6</sup> *He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”* <sup>7</sup> *When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him,* <sup>8</sup> *and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

Cornelius was a common name among the Romans. A man named P. Cornelius Sulla had freed 10,000 slaves in 82 BC. Many of these slaves joined the army; therefore, military people were often named Cornelius. He was a centurion in the Roman army. The Tyndale Commentary notes that Cornelius has many similarities to the unnamed centurion in *Luke 7*. You remember! The centurion who had so much faith in Jesus' authority that he said all Jesus had to do was speak a word and his servant would be healed. It is, of course, only speculation that the two men are the same.

Many Gentiles were attracted to the moral and ethical standards of Judaism. Therefore, they became known as God-fearers. We know from *Acts 11:3* that Cornelius had not submitted to circumcision meaning he had not become a convert to the Jewish faith. As a God-fearer, he would have attended synagogue meetings, listened to the teachings of the Old Testament and most likely regularly attended prayer times.

We are told Cornelius was praying at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) which was a regular prayer time. An angel of God appeared to him in a vision and said: *Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.* The angel's words reveal that Cornelius' prayers pleased God. **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)** <sup>6</sup> *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

God condemns His people's sense of superiority.

**Read Acts 10:9-16 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.* <sup>10</sup> *And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance* <sup>11</sup> *and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.* <sup>12</sup> *In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.* <sup>13</sup> *And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."* <sup>14</sup> *But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."* <sup>15</sup> *And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."* <sup>16</sup> *This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.*

Religion and prejudice are often found within the same heart. It is probably the reason so many use the excuse of hypocrites in the church as a reason for not attending. Prejudice is one of those "sins" that is easily spotted in another individual but extremely difficult to recognize in one's own actions. Peter had his prejudices and, it was time to cast those aside.

Peter was staying in Joppa which is located south of the modern day Tel Aviv. It was from Joppa that God sent Peter, a Jew, to the Gentile, Cornelius. From this same city of Joppa 800 years earlier, God had given the Jew, Jonah, his mission of going to the Gentile nation of Nineveh. God had been whispering to the hearts of the Jewish people for centuries that a relationship with God was not for the Jewish race alone.

Scripture reveals that Peter fell into a trance. A trance is an ecstatic state of mind that gives a person a sense of detachment from their physical surroundings. The Greek word for trance literally means "standing outside." The distinctions between a trance, a dream, and a vision are not always clear. The Apostle Paul fell into a trance and Christ commanded him to evangelize the Gentiles (**Acts 22:17**).

As Peter refused to take a meal from the sheet, we are reminded that food of any kind does not enter into the heart but passes through the digestive tract. Food makes no impression whatsoever on the soul or spirit of the one who eats or drinks. Jesus said in **Mark 7:18-19 (ESV)** <sup>18</sup> *...Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,* <sup>19</sup> *since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?"* (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

As we consider Peter's refusal to 'kill and eat' at the command of the heavenly voice, recall Peter's similar reaction to Jesus' announcement at Caesarea Philippi of His impending suffering, rejection and death. **Matthew**

**16:22 (ESV)** <sup>22</sup> *And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."* When Peter said these words, Jesus publicly rebuked him. It has been said, "We can say 'No,' and we can say 'Lord'; but we cannot say 'No, Lord!'" If He is truly our Lord, then we must say 'Yes, Lord, Yes!' in obedient submission.

If Peter was so 'put off' at the thought of killing and eat an 'unclean' animal, why not just pick a 'clean' animal from what was being offered? The point is the 'clean' animals were mingled with the 'unclean' ones and for the devout Jew, the mingling of clean with unclean would have caused all the animals to be unclean. Food may have been his first consideration, but Peter would soon understand the greater message. The very things that had separated Jews from Gentiles were no longer applicable. As is often said, the ground at the foot of the cross is level ground. This revelation to Peter plainly teaches that God is calling out both Gentiles and Jews for His salvation. They were not to be bound by the law.

H.A. Ironside relates a personal story concerning this passage. He wrote:

I have heard my mother tell that when my own dear father was dying, this passage was running through his mind and he kept repeating, "A great sheet and wild beasts, and— and— and..." He could not seem to get the next word but went back and started over, and once more came to that same place. A friend bent over and whispered, "John, it says, 'creeping things.'" "Oh, yes," he said, "that is how I got in. Just a poor good-for-nothing creeping thing, but I got in— saved by grace." No matter how low, vile or utterly useless and corrupt or unclean, the soul that trusts Jesus is in the sheet let down from heaven and will have a place in glory by and by.

After three times, Peter got the picture. When Peter understood the Lord's plan, the men Cornelius had sent to Peter arrived. God's timing is perfect timing – never coincidence. We see that Peter really did get the message. He did not say, 'Jesus is NOT for YOU unclean Gentiles' and he did not even say, 'ya'll go on back to Cornelius and I'll come by a bit later.'" Peter immediately invited the Gentile messengers in and let them stay overnight. Our study picks up at the point where Peter has made his way to the house of Cornelius.

When you consider that Cornelius worked for the same occupation force that carried out Jesus' execution, you know it's a God-thing that he and Peter are together! God calls His people to welcome all who believe the gospel.

**Read Acts 10:34-43 (ESV)** <sup>34</sup> *So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), <sup>37</sup> you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup> And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup>*

*but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear,<sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.<sup>42</sup> And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.<sup>43</sup> To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”*

Even though Cornelius did not yet know that Jesus was the promised coming Jewish Messiah, there is every reason to believe that Cornelius had already expressed faith, like the Old Testament saints, in God and in His promised Messiah. Cornelius believed in God but God wanted more; God wanted a personal relationship with this son of Japheth. And God wants a personal relationship with each one of us as well.

So far, everyone in the First Jerusalem Church, everyone who followed Jesus was a Jew, or at least a half-Jew. So everyone assumed that, to become a Christian, you first had to convert to Judaism. But in today’s story Peter sees God at work in people who are not Jews, people very different from him. Kerry Haynes describes Peter’s reaction this way, “I get it, God. You don’t play favorites. Everyone matters to you!” Converting to Judaism was not the answer – Jesus was the answer then and is still the answer today!

God doesn’t play favorites! Jesus is for everyone. There is no skin color beyond His care. He does not care if you are rich or poor. There is no gender not precious to him. There is no sin too great for his love. Everyone counts! God even loves those people who are out mowing their yards on Sunday morning just as much as He loves those who are in Sunday School. God loved Cornelius, a Gentile, and He loved Peter, a Jew even though they were worlds apart. That’s the story of Cornelius! God accepts us just as we are!

**Read Acts 10:44-48 (ESV)** <sup>44</sup> *While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.<sup>45</sup> And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.<sup>46</sup> For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared,<sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”<sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.*

On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to earth, the people spoke in various tongues for the purpose of others coming to know the Lord. In the house of Cornelius, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles gave vocal witness once again. This time to the six Jews (**Acts 11:12**) who were present with Peter. **Their speaking in tongues served as a sign to the Jewish believers present that God had determined to pour out His Spirit on Gentile as well as on Jewish believers.** This passage is not suggesting that every new believer gives evidence of salvation by speaking in tongues. However, it is true that every believer will use his or her tongue to glorify God. **Romans 10:9-10 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*