

“God’s Way Of Saving People”

Acts 10:1-23

Series: Book of Acts [#13]

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Theme: **God Uses Faithful Believers In His Saving Work.**

Introduction

This morning we are taking a second look at the first part of Acts chapter 10. Last time we looked at this section along with the last part of chapter 9 and saw how God shapes or fashions us to be part of His work of *breaking new ground*. He does that as...

- He confirms and clarifies His call;
- through prayer;
- through His truth, the Bible;
- and through our obedience to Him.

We saw those truths in Peter. Today our focus shifts to Cornelius and how God brought the gospel to him, and him to faith in Jesus Christ. In this we see “*God’s Way Of Saving People.*”

How, where and when God rescues people from the realm of spiritual darkness and transfers them into His kingdom of light should be of great interest to us. We want people to have the free, full forgiveness and everlasting life of God. Because this is a matter of eternal destiny, we are concerned about and pray for others, often for weeks, months and years. We also try to live and speak a clear testimony for God, His love and grace for all people.

And so it is important to have an accurate view of our role in God saving people. That includes avoiding the “it all depends on me” kind of thinking which overestimates our role as well as the “God will do it Himself” kind of thinking which underestimates our role. That attitude was expressed by an *esteemed minister* at a meeting in 1786. He demanded that the young minister William Carey pose a question for discussion. Carey hesitated, but finally suggested they discuss “Whether the command given to the apostles to ‘teach all nations,’ was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent?”

The *esteemed minister* was flabbergasted that Carey would even suggest this question. After he regained his composure he said to Carey, “Young man, sit down! When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid, or mine.”

This morning we will see “*God’s Way of Saving People.*” The central lesson is that *God Uses Faithful Believers In His Saving Work*. We begin with the very important principle that..

God Gives Light To Those Who Seek Him.

We certainly see this in Cornelius. Let's note a few things about Cornelius, the man. First, he was a Roman soldier. Go to the opening verse, 10:1, "Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort." As we pointed out last week, Caesarea was on the coast of the Mediterranean about 30 miles north of Joppa where Peter was at this time. It was the Roman provincial capital of Judea and so the center for administrative and the military. Herod the Great had developed it on a grand scale and dedicated the city to Caesar Augustus, hence *Caesarea*.

Cornelius was a Centurion, or a commander of 100 men. He was a leader, an officer. He was probably a long-term veteran. The Italian cohort was comprised of volunteers rather than conscripts. They were skilled and experienced. Their functions in places like Judea were mostly policing and security.

Then, Cornelius was a good man. Verse 2 describes him as *devout*, that is a man with personal convictions based on sincere religious beliefs. He was concerned about spiritual life. Verse 2 also tells us that he "gave many alms to the Jewish people." Giving alms to help poor people was important to the Jewish people.

And when we drop down to verse 22, his servants describe him to Peter as being "well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews." They did not, of course, mean that every Jewish person knew who Cornelius was. They were simply telling Peter that all the Jews who knew him thought well of him. This was a rare and high compliment because Cornelius was a Gentile, and especially rare because many Jews hated the Roman army which occupied their land.

These are a few basics about the man Cornelius. He certainly was accomplished, respected, honorable; a *good* man.

Let's move on to look at Cornelius, the seeker of God. Verse 2 tells us that he "feared God." This phrase tells us he respected the one true God. But, as one scholar writes, "there has been no little amount of controversy about what Luke meant" with this description (Witherington, 1998:341). It seems to indicate that Cornelius had accepted the basic beliefs of Judaism, but was not yet a full convert. He was still considered a Gentile by the Jews. But because he was exploring Judaism and following its practices, they would have thought more highly of him than other Gentiles.

Luke adds that he "feared God *with all his household*." Just as Cornelius was a leader of men in the army, he also was a moral and spiritual leader at home. It shows his care and concern for his family and servants. He also "prayed to God continually" (2). He was continually seeking to know God, to find Him to please Him. The time of day noted in verse 3 suggests that Cornelius had adopted the regular Jewish times of prayer. This event was at the time of afternoon prayers, at 3:00 p.m., set to coincide with the afternoon sacrifice at the Temple.

Let's pause here and note an important truth. It is good to live an upstanding life, to be sincere and pious, to earnestly seek God, but all of that is not enough. Salvation is God's gift of grace *through faith in Jesus Christ*. Nothing short of this will do. There is no other way to God. There is salvation in no one or nothing else. Jesus made this clear when he told us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).

The apostle John put it this way, in chapter 5 of his first letter, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (12). The only way to God's gift of salvation, to forgiveness of our sins and receiving everlasting life with Him is to come to God through Jesus, placing our trust in Him alone.

Along with this is the other critical truth that "God gives light to those who seek Him." People are always looking for something. Something...

- to make us feel better, to feel happy;
- to give direction and certainty;
- to give a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

So there is an endless catalogue of man-made religions and philosophies.

God makes it clear that people who truly seek Him can and will find Him. This is His promise to everyone who genuinely, honestly seeks Him. In the Old Testament, God warned Israel about the cost of disobeying Him. If they disobeyed, He would remove them from the land and scatter them among the nations. But He also said, in Deuteronomy 4:29, that even though scattered, "... from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul."

The prophet Isaiah rang out God's invitation, 55:6-7,

"Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

The prophet Jeremiah gave this same message in Jeremiah 29:11-13,

"'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.'"

Then, Jesus Himself has told us, in Matthew 7:7-8,

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who

seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

As well, the writer Hebrews tells us, “...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (11:6).

Now, if this is true, and it certainly is, then why do so many sincere people not find God but follow man-made religions and their own ideas? God pulls back the curtain covering our hearts as well and the spiritual realm as He tells us through the apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-23,

“...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

Now let's go back to Cornelius and see how all of this worked in his life. He was looking for God, not just religion, not just a morale booster or his own remedy for feeling good, fulfilled and at peace. However God did it, God gave him the light to turn to the Old Testament Scriptures. He followed God's instruction there on ordering his life, prayer and seeking God. Every time he responded positively to the light of God, God then gave him more light.

We come again to verse 3,

“About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, ‘Cornelius!’ And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ And he said to him, ‘Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.’”

God was faithful. Because Cornelius kept responding positively, God even gave him this vision with an angel to tell him the next step he needed to take. Yes, “*God gives light to those who seek Him,*” even to a Gentile, a career soldier of the occupying forces.

Now, a word to those who have thought about God, considered His message but, like Cornelius at this point in Luke's account, have not yet come to put their faith in God. The

example of Cornelius, and the direction from God is “*Respond!*” Respond to the light of God, *now!*

There is a *bad news* side of this. That is, we cannot presume there will be another day, another opportunity to respond to God. There comes a time, and we can not predict or spot it, when God allows those who do not respond to His light to go their own way. It is dangerous to presume upon God’s grace by delaying.

The *good news* is that you can respond now. As Paul wrote at the opening of 2 Corinthians 6,

“...we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says, ‘AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU.’ Behold, now is ‘THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,’ behold, now is ‘THE DAY OF SALVATION.’” (1:1b-2)

“God gives light to those who seek Him,” and...

God Sends Believers To Bring The Gospel.

An angel did not bring the gospel to Cornelius. Many people are interested in angels. The television program *Touched By An Angel* ran for nine seasons. Books about angels, jewelry and other angel-related products continue to sell well.

Angels *are* special. They enjoy and can do things that you and I don’t, at least at the present time.

- They are face to face with God in heaven;
- they don’t have weaknesses and sin to trouble them;
- they serve God perfectly.

Having said that, angels can’t do some things you and I can do now, and will do in the future.

- They sing praises to God but they do not, they will not sing the heavenly song of the *redeemed*;
- they will not be given crowns as rewards and then joyfully put them down at Jesus’ feet;
- they are not used by God to lead people to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, they can have a role in preparing the way, but not in the conclusion when God changes a person for eternity. God uses His people to bring the gospel to others.

Look once again at the record of Cornelius’ vision, beginning in the middle of verse 4,

“[the angel] said to [Cornelius], ‘Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send

for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.’”

The angel’s message was brief, but specific with the exact details God wanted Cornelius to know. Then drop down again to verse 22 (b) where Cornelius’ servants tell Peter their master “was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.”

Now why, why would God give a vision, send an angel with all of this information and not have the angel just go ahead and explain the good news of Jesus Christ to Cornelius? The answer is that God has reserved the privilege of leading another person to Christ to people, both directly face to face and also indirectly.

As we go on in the account, we see that a faithful believer brought the gospel to Cornelius. Cornelius followed God’s directions and sent for Peter. The instructions, again, are in verse 5, “Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” Verse 7 gives us Cornelius’ response.

“When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.”

These were rather sketchy instructions. Verse 17 tells us that the messengers asked for directions to Simon the tanner’s place when they arrived in Joppa. Some suggest that the messengers probably didn’t need detailed directions since they could simply use their noses and follow the *aroma* to the tannery. When the messengers arrived, they also told Peter that Cornelius was told that Peter had a message for him (22).

While the messengers were on their way God continued to prepare Peter, the *faithful believer* he had chosen for this task. We looked at that preparation last week. God did that

- By clarifying and confirming the call;
- through prayer;
- through His Word;
- through Peter’s obedience.

Note again that God did not use the angel, He did not use the vision to present the gospel and lead Cornelius to saving faith. He used Peter, a *faithful believer*.

Think about Paul’s straightforward statement about this in Romans 10,

“... WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they

hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!'" (13-15)

God's process is still the same. Most of the time it is by direct face to face witness. At other times it is by indirect means, e.g., the sharing of Scripture, Christian literature and broadcasting. Representatives of HCJB ministries held a meeting here Tuesday evening. They mentioned that many Muslims have been experiencing dreams or visions pointing them toward Christ. Other missions are also reporting this. Listen this account of a man named Ibrahim.

"My supernatural dreams first began during primary school. I was in the habit of praying each night before sleep...praising Allah, thanking Him, and continually asking for guidance from Him.

"In [my] first dream I was surprised to see clouds gathering on top of a mountain. After the clouds gathered two angels dressed in white robes stood on top of the mountain. Jesus was standing between the angels. He left the angels and came to where I stood watching. As he approached me, I knelt down and he laid his hands on my head. ... I told no one [of the dream] for fear of what my family may do to me.

"A year later I had another dream. Again Jesus was standing in between two angels at the mountain, but this time as he came toward me he was trying to go past me. I begged him not to pass by me...again I remained silent [about the dream] because of my fear.

"[After another] year [I had third dream]. As I looked upon the face of Jesus at the top of the mountain, he was full of compassion and was smiling down upon me. The two angels were absent this time, but instead a vast multitude of people was present. We were going to where Jesus was, full of peace and joy. The next morning I sat down to meditate upon this most recent dream.

"I again chose to remain silent about these events, but did begin to look for opportunities whereby I could get to know this Christ better. Ironically enough, the Gideons were distributing free Bibles at my school to every interested student. I received a Bible, the first one I had ever carried in my hands. Each student was encouraged to read it every day. The Lord spoke to me during that time as I read in the gospel of John Jesus saying, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.' (John 14:6, NIV)

"This verse provided a bridge between myself and Jesus, and I placed my full trust in Him."

You see, as with Cornelius, the dreams pointed Ibrahim toward Christ. God used *faithful*

believers who gave money for the Bibles to be printed and shipped, who gave time to distribute them, who prayed for God to use them, to bring young Ibrahim to saving faith in Christ.

Conclusion.

This is “*God’s Way Of Saving People.*” People from every region, every nationality and culture in the world. God uses faithful believers in His saving work.

Question: How faithful are we?

- Are we faithful in our lifestyle to clearly radiate God’s love, truth and grace?
- Are we faithful in praying for family members, friends, neighbors, the people of our country and world to come to Christ?
- Are we faithful in financially supporting God’s work here and around the world?
- Are we faithful to speak to people about Jesus?

I often think of the apostle Paul’s testimony as he opened his letter to the church at Rome,

“I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*” (1:14-16)

Christ has done more for us than we can ever express and so each one of us, with Paul, should gladly proclaim “*I am not ashamed of the gospel!*” “*I will live it! I will share it!*” Yes, sometimes it is not easy. Sometimes people will mock or ridicule us. But that doesn’t begin to compare with who and what Jesus is to us.

As you spend a few moments with God now,

- For you who have not yet placed your faith in Jesus Christ, do not let this opportunity pass. Do not presume upon God’s mercy. Respond now. Come to Jesus now.
- For you who have done that, thank Him for the gospel, the good news of Jesus that was shared with you.
- Thank Him for Jesus who saved you.
- Determine to see the world, all the people of this world, through Jesus’ eyes and *be faithful*, be a *faithful witness* for Him.

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