

The Great Stories of the Early Church
30 - Peter's Ministry 04
Cornelius03
A Devout Man
Acts 10:1-8

Acts 10:1-8

- 1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band,
- 2 A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.
- 3 He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius.
- 4 And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.
- 5 And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter:
- 6 He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.
- 7 And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually;
- 8 And when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa. KJV

Introduction:

I had thought this morning to pass on from this text to the rest of the story concerning Cornelius. You will recall, I hope, that while these events recorded here were going on Peter was residing in the house of the tanner in or near Joppa, a very unpleasant and odorful place where he may have found some rest from the attention that had been heaped upon him because of the healing of Aeneas at Lydda and the raising of Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead.

If you have read ahead just a little you already know that Peter will be having his own encounter with God in a vision about the time that these messengers from Cornelius arrive.

Let us remember what we have already learned about Cornelius and his situation. The city of Caesarea was located on the coast about 30 miles north of Joppa. It had originally been named 'Strato's Tower,' and had been given to Herod by Augustus Caesar around 30 B.C. To show his appreciation Herod had changed the name of the city to honor Caesar and had spent an amazing amount of money making it into a showcase city with a magnificent harbor, a coliseum, and a racetrack. It was primarily a Gentile city but, being located where it was, with a strong Jewish presence.

The designation 'Italian' band meant that Cornelius and his men were natives of Italy. At this point in history many of the soldiers in the Roman army had been conscripted from the other countries of the empire. So, this was an elite squad probably located in this city because the Roman proconsul (Pilate) had his headquarters there, even though he kept a residence at

Jerusalem as well.

The Roman armies were divided into Legions, each of which had 6000 soldiers at full strength. Each Legion was divided into 10 Cohorts of 600 men each and each Cohort was subdivided into 6 Centuries containing 100 men. The non-commissioned officer at the head of each Century was the Centurion.

This is the third centurion to be introduced to us in scripture. You will recall that the first one had a servant that was sick and had sent to Jesus for help but did not feel worthy for Jesus to enter his house. He therefore expressed confidence that just a word from Jesus would be sufficient and Jesus had expressed admiration for the man's faith. The second one that the scriptures mention is the one in charge of Jesus' crucifixion who remarked as Jesus died that certainly He must have been the Son of God. So, to this point, all of the centurions brought to our attention have been men who have had a powerful testimony of the work of God in their souls.

The reason that I am revisiting this text today is that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used a word that I have not been able to escape for these two weeks since we last studied this passage, "*He was a devout man.*"

I. This is a word, used by God the Holy Spirit, which signifies that Cornelius was a man among men, maybe the most profoundly godly layman that we encounter in the totality of scripture.

The word 'devout,' a translation of the Greek word 'eusebeis,' appears only four times in our New Testament and two of those times are in this chapter. It is used in v.2 and again in v.7 to describe the soldier that Cornelius sent to find Peter. It will be used again in 22:12 to describe Ananias who baptized Saul. The only other time it is used is in 2 Peter 2:9.

2 Peter 2:9

9 The Lord knoweth how to deliver the *godly* out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: KJV

Another form of the word is found in two places.

2 Tim 3:12

12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

Titus 2:11-12

11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,

12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; KJV

Additionally, the word appears a number of times in the Greek OT, the LXX.

Prov 12:12 The desires of the ungodly are evil; but the roots of the godly are firmly set.

Prov 13:19 The desires of the godly gladden the soul, but the works of the ungodly are far from knowledge.

Isa 34:16 O Lord God of Israel, from the ends of the earth we have heard wonderful things, and there is hope to the godly: but they shall say, Woe to the despisers, that despise the law.

But these words, ‘devout’ and ‘godly,’ need definition. We need more help in determining what exactly is being said about the man Cornelius. What is a ‘devout’ man? How does one become ‘godly?’

But first I would like to challenge you to think of another man who was not a prophet nor a spiritual leader in any way to whom God spoke in such a special way to bring him into a full knowledge of God’s will.

We know that He spoke to special servants like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua as well as his prophets. To these, He granted special revelations of His purposes as well as specific instructions, visions, dreams, encounters with angels and the like.

But the laymen to whom God spoke received words of judgment and condemnation. I am thinking particularly of Balaam and Nebuchadnezzar. I know of no other man outside of God’s chosen servants who was noticed by God in anything near the positive way that Cornelius was.

And, the reason given is that he was ‘devout.’ He was ‘godly.’

I know of no compliment that would or could be grander. I know of nothing that I would rather have as a memory that I would leave behind in the minds of others than “he was a godly man.” Could there be a statement on one’s tombstone that would speak more highly than that simple statement that the Holy Spirit had Luke write, “A Devout Man”?

II. What is it to be Devout?

I wonder if any inspired writer would ever have been moved to call me that? How about you?

The word ‘devout’ is used almost exclusively in reference to faith and religion. It is reserved for those whose attitudes and behaviors are ruled exclusively by the religion they practice.

It would not surprise us to see the word used to describe Paul, or Peter, or John... but a Roman Centurion? How can this be?

We understand the words ‘devout’ and ‘godly’ to mean that a person excels in all things related to God: Faith, Love for God, Devotion to Him, Prayer (and fasting?), Generosity (alms), and Obedience to all of the moral commands of God, otherwise known as The Law of God.

In other words, such a person is a “fanatic.” They are “too religious.” They “take this religion thing far too seriously.” They “spoil everything.” They “don’t want to have fun and they want

to keep others from having fun too.”

Such devotion and godliness manifests itself in behavior that is odd to other people, even other people who are supposedly Christian.

Again, if you have read ahead in the book of Acts you know that some people were extremely upset with Peter for going to this godly man’s house and having fellowship with him. Nevermind that Peter did it according to the command of God and that God had appeared to Cornelius to tell him to send for Peter. These actions were peculiar, as many godly behaviors are, and cause people to be frustrated.

Parenthetical -

Truly devout and godly people are despised in many places. Remember Tim Tebow? Now I do not know if he is devout and godly or not but the mere act of bowing in reverence to God on the football field was enough for him to be despised and hated.

There are many so-called ‘Christians’ who will argue with you that one need not be profoundly committed to God, to His Word, and to the church, that God is just fine with mediocre and sometimes service.

And why do they lobby so hard for this to be considered true? Because half-heartedness is all they intend to offer to God and the devout person makes them look bad. They assume that God grades on the curve and they want no one to set too high a standard.

Cornelius and every other devout person who has ever lived was willing to walk a path different from everyone else. One must often walk alone, leave friends behind, sometimes even leave family behind in order to live a godly life.

End of Parenthesis

III. Being Devout, Being Godly, is by no means an easy thing.

Jesus compared it to dying.

Matt 16:24-25

24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. KJV

He compared it to abandoning our family.

Matt 10:37-39

37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

38 And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

- 39 He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. KJV
- Luke 14:26-33
- 26 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.
- 27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.
- 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?
- 29 Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him,
- 30 Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.
- 31 Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?
- 32 Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.
- 33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. KJV

Godliness is an expensive enterprise.

IV. But here is the real issue, God has a special place for those who love Him and serve Him supremely.

Look again at what the angel said to Cornelius.

V.4 - "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God."

Other translations read like this.

Acts 10:4 And the angel replied, "Your prayers and charities have not gone unnoticed by God! TLB

Acts 10:4 "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. NASU

Acts 10:4 The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. (from New International Version)

What kind of works ascend up before God and gain His notice?

We talk about the fact that even our best works are somewhat tainted with our imperfections and I do not propose that Cornelius was doing perfect works but one cannot help but conclude that they were works of the most excellent kind, coming from a heart that was truly devoted toward God and in complete accord and agreement with scripture. This man was doing excellently in the realm of godly service both to God and man.

This means that Cornelius knew that his works were no part of his standing with God for God does not receive works as credit toward our justification.

These were works of faith and love, service rendered purely out of love for God and concern for his fellow creatures, particularly the poor.

It is absolutely astounding that we find this kind of pure worship and service in a man who was still and uncircumcised Gentile.

How do we explain such a thing?

There can be only one explanation. God in His Sovereignty had reached into this man's soul and stirred him to life and Cornelius had responded in absolute and profound gratitude. We wonder how long he lived in this state and how could he have lived through the last five years and not known of Christ?

How could he do the duties of a Centurion with such a heart toward God and man?

V. Cornelius stands as a blazing emblem, a testimony to Christians in every age to seek excellence in their service to God.

It grieves me that we live in a day in which the Grace of God is handled in a presumptive way.

It is an antinomian age even among people who claim to know the principles of the gospel and the Doctrines of Grace.

Jude wrote about this, warning the saints.

Jude 3-4

3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.

4 For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. KJV

How does one do this, turn the grace of God into lasciviousness? Just in this way. They say that God in His Grace and by the Work of Christ has removed the condemnation of the Law and absolutely, eternally justified us.

Therefore, it is not possible that we should be lost, that we cannot possibly come into condemnation or lose our salvation. Therefore, they say, we must not worry about sin and guilt. We are free and not bound by rules and laws and such. Therefore, we can live as we please without fear of judgment or condemnation.

The problem is that this a lie enfolded in truth. We are eternally justified if we are in Christ. It is

not possible for us to come into condemnation and be lost.

But there is a wrinkle here. Faith that does not obey God and produce service that is praiseworthy in heaven is not saving faith.

James 2:18-20

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

God's people must follow the example of Cornelius. We must produce good works that bear the mark of excellence and not follow the crowd that relishes and gives permission to wickedness within the church. Those that teach such to people are false prophets for sure but our world is full of them.

VI. Cornelius proves that God expects and approves of Good Works in the lives of His people and that it is important to seek to excel in the service of God.

Grace when rightly understood affirms this. How could one withhold his best labors from the One Who bore his sins in His Own body on the cross, who was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

It is a wicked and miserly soul that will refuse to work toward excellence for one who gave him so much.