

What God Hath Cleansed

"Call for Simon, whose surname is Peter, who shall tell thee words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved"—Acts 11:13-14

ACTS CHAPTER TEN

THE story of Cornelius is very interesting and important. It occurred about seven years after the Crucifixion, and it was the big turning point in the history of the Ecclesia of Christ.

This first seven years had been devoted to preaching to the Jews: although at its end, just previous to this (as we read in chapter 8), the Truth had been extended to the Samaritans, who kept the Law of Moses, and to the Ethiopian eunuch, who was obviously a proselyte of the Law and almost certainly circumcised into that Law.

The baptism of Cornelius is the culmination of Peter's recorded labors. Immediately thereafter, the narrative of Acts turns permanently to Paul. We read of Peter's imprisonment and release in chapter 12, and he passes out of the direct record in Acts 12:17—

"He departed, and went into another place."

Up to this point, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry ten years before, Peter had been the unquestioned leader and spokesman and most prominent of the apostles. After the Crucifixion, it was always Peter who led and initiated everything, beginning with the replacement of Judas by Matthias.

But henceforth the whole record centers about Paul, while James appears as the leader and spokesman in Jerusalem. Peter only appears in the record incidentally in connection with the activities of Paul, as when Paul first visited Peter in Jerusalem or when he rebuked him at Antioch.

But Peter's epistles reveal a continued life of faithful labor, and a beautiful development of spiritual character as the apostle and guide to scattered Israel, as Paul was to the Gentiles.

But first it was Peter's work, as the holder of the keys of the Kingdom, to open the door: first to the Jews on the day of Pentecost, and seven years later to the Gentiles in this very detailed account of Cornelius.

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WE learn from verse 1 that Cornelius was a soldier, an officer, and a Roman; stationed at Cesarea, the Roman headquarters for Palestine. It is strange that two other Roman centurions before Cornelius stand out remarkably in the Gospel record: the one at Capernaum who "loved the Jewish nation" and had built them a synagogue and who had greater faith in Jesus than any in Israel, and the one at the cross who said—

"Truly this was the Son of God."

—believing, like the thief on the cross, in the hour of apparent defeat, when all the nation rejected him.

Verse 2: "A devout man..."

The word for devout is EUSEBEES, meaning "well-reverenced," that is, having much reverence actively directed to good ends and activities.

"... that feared God "

—mentally devoted to serving and pleasing God.

"...with all his house."

His whole household was in beautiful harmony with the powerful godliness of this remarkable Gentile. We learn further (verse 22) that he was "of good report"—highly esteemed—"among ALL the nation of the Jews": a remarkable achievement for a man who had to represent and enforce the resented domination of a hated foreign power.

Here was one of the most remarkable men of Scripture: one of the usually proud and ignorant conquering heathen race who could see in spite of Israel's corruption and wickedness and degradation—that this people's God was the One True God of all the earth.

He had apparently seen no miracles. He saw only a corrupt, hypocritical political priesthood, and an evil nation ripe for destruction, bitterly divided over the claims of Christ, and persecuting his disciples. Yet he knew—he clearly perceived—that this was the people of God: and he loved them.

He was not a proselyte to the Law. The whole significance of his admission to the Body of Christ hinges on the fact that he was not a proselyte, for this event was the great historic opening up of the door of faith to the Gentiles purely as Gentiles, with no half-way measures.

WHY was he not a proselyte? Why had he not gone as far into the service and communion of God as was provided and possible for a believing Gentile? For here was a very intense and devoted man, and his devotion was clearly not something that had just happened, for he feared God with all his house, and he was well established in the respect of the whole nation of the Jews.

The answer seems to lie in the fact of what he saw before him. He saw a nation divided over the preaching of Christ as the Son of God and end of the Law.

Peter says (verse 37) that Cornelius knew about these things—about what Christ had done, and what was being proclaimed about him. He knew Israel's God was the true God. He sought God with all his heart. But where should he turn to approach Him more closely?—to the Law or to Christ?

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V. 2: He "gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always."

Here are the two essentials. Here is the secret of his great blessing as the father and forerunner of the Gentile faithful. Here is the great practical lesson of the chapter—

"Seek, and ye shall find: Give, and ye shall be given."

He did not just give alms and pray to God. There are millions that do that, and they just come and go. He gave MUCH alms, and prayed ALWAYS. There is the key. This was his whole way of life—CONSTANTLY doing good to others, and ever seeking God in prayer.

Without this, he would have been nothing. Without this, no one is anything. "Giving alms" does not necessarily mean giving material things. So many excuse themselves from this divine obligation by the claim they have nothing to spare (which may be true, though it is usually rooted in greed and fear and selfishness and faithlessness, rather than true fact). But giving is of one's self, and time, and labor, and love, and interest, and concern.

"FREELY have ye received: FREELY give."

The day is soon coming when many professed believers will be found clutching their pitiful hoarded bag of unfaithful stewardship, and will be exposed in their naked, shivering, faithless greed for all the assembled ages to see.

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Verse 3: He saw an angel. It was the 9th hour—the typical hour of prayer, and he was in the act of praying when the angel appeared, as he says in v. 30—

"Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold a man stood before me in bright clothing."

The revelation will ALWAYS be in the "hour of prayer." It can come no other way—
"Seek, and ye shall find."

He saw an angel. Angels are very real, and very present. We are never alone. We should endeavor to be much more aware and much more conscious of this than we are. This is the difference between fear and faith, wherever we are and whatever may come.

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

Here was an unbaptized, unjustified Gentile whose prayers were accepted by God. But his prayers and his alms did not save him. He was seeking God—seeking knowledge—seeking salvation. Such God hears and guides into the Way of Salvation.

The angel said (verse 6) that Peter would tell him what he "ought to do." In verse 22 we are told he was "warned" from God to seek the instruction from Peter. And Acts 11:14 tells us even more fully and explicitly that the angel told him Peter would instruct him how he could and should be saved.

His prayers and alms and good intentions and love for God, while highly well-pleasing, were not enough. There must still be knowledge and obedience to the one appointed Way of Salvation, into and through Christ by baptism. Even after he had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 44) he STILL must be baptized into Christ to lay hold on salvation; and so Peter commanded him (verse 48).

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Verse 5: "Send to Joppa, to Peter."

This would be about 40 miles down the Mediterranean coast, to the present Tel Aviv-Jaffa. He was not told to go himself to Peter, but to send for Peter to come to him. There were several reasons for this.

Not only Cornelius himself (which might just appear to be a special exception), but his Gentile household and kinsmen were to be instructed and received into the Faith. This godly and energetic man had not kept his faith to himself, but by the power of his zeal and example had drawn and influenced many associated with him, and had thereby providentially prepared a little community of Gentiles to receive Christ.

The more we consider this man and what is recorded of him, the more we shall be impressed by him. Though a man of authority and responsibility and dignity, he had no scruples or hesitancy about falling down publicly at the feet of Peter in thankfulness to God and respect to God's messenger.

It was important, too, to establish the new open door more clearly, that Peter GO TO HIM—in his Gentile surroundings—outside the Law—and associate with him there.

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Verse 6: "He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the seaside."

We are reminded of Christ's birth in a stable. A tannery was a despised and unclean place, both ceremoniously and actually. Because of the odor and defilement, tanneries were required to be outside the city limits, as in this case. It was a lowly, looked-down-upon trade. That Peter should be lodged here indicated the lowliness of the positions of the believers in Joppa.

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Verse 7: "He called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually."

Here was another, a subordinate, who under Cornelius' guidance had devoted himself to the worship of the one true God.

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Verse 8: "And he declared all these things unto them."

He made no secret of it, and stood on no ceremony, but told his servants all about his experience. Clearly there was no false pride of position, but a remarkable and simple openness and natural humility.

Though it would be by now getting on into the late afternoon, for he had seen the vision about 3:00, and these men had to prepare for the journey, he still sent them right off that same day, and they arrived at Peter's lodging a little after noon the next day.

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CORNELIUS, a devout Gentile and of good reputation in all Israel, has been specially prepared by an angel for this great historic event in the development of the Truth—the first meeting together in worship and fellowship (and undoubtedly of breaking the bread), of Jew and Gentile, without any intermediate steps of proselytism in the Law of Moses.

In the meantime, as these messengers approach (verse 9), Peter is likewise being specially and divinely prepared.

The way in which it is done is beautiful and interesting and instructive and impressive. It was not just theoretically and coldly explained to him. Rather it was graphically and unforgettably and vividly manifested, yet just a step at a time, causing Peter to ponder and wonder just what he was being taught, and what he would be expected to do.

Peter had never eaten anything contrary to the restrictions of the Law of Moses. Like every sincere and pious Jew, this was fundamentally and almost indelibly engraved into his whole character and mentality from early childhood.

It would not only be mentally, but physically, nauseating to him to think of eating anything he had all his life looked upon as defiled and unclean. His "Not so, Lord!" is very emphatic: not just "No," but "Never!" "By no means!" He recoiled in horror from the idea.

Faithful Israelites for 1500 years had built their purity of conscience and peace of mind with God upon the careful obedience of His holy Law, which had been engraved upon their nation so solemnly, and which carried such dreadful warnings and penalties for disobedience.

And then suddenly, without any warning or preparations, he is told to cast this divine pattern of a lifetime aside.

Actually, there HAD been warning and preparation, but he had not perceived it. Looking back now, once he had had this great lesson, he would see much that he had not seen before—

"Go ye into ALL the world, and preach the Gospel to EVERY creature. He that believeth

and is baptized shall be saved."

Not 'Preach the Law,' but 'Preach the GOSPEL.' And not 'He that is circumcised,' but, 'He that believeth and is BAPTIZED.' For seven years they had labored against bitter persecution to show Israel the great Light of the glory of Christ. But now the time had come for the Gospel to break out of all its Jewish swaddling bands and restrictions, and go forth to all the world.

Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, had already been called, and was apparently at this very time in seclusion in Sinai, being prepared directly by Christ for his great work.

But Peter must be the one to first open the door.

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Verse 15: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common."

Rather, more strongly, as in the Diaglott and RV—

"What GOD hath cleansed, do not YOU make common or polluted!"

There is a great lesson here for us. So often in our supposed zeal for God's law, we presume to dictate to that law according to our own emotions and established prejudices, instead of being careful to be always ready to learn. This command to Peter was not just given once, or even twice, but THREE TIMES—

"Arise, Peter. Kill and eat."

And three times he blindly and emotionally recoiled from it, but doubtless with increasing realization each time that a great new lesson was in process, though not knowing what that lesson might be.

As Peter is pondering this vision, the men from Cornelius arrive at the door. We see how the wisdom and providence of God is gradually working out these events.

At this point, Peter gets another direct divine communication—

"Arise, get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them."

Further instruction and assurance, but still no explanation. Here too, there is much food for thought. We would like everything explained in detail. We would like to have all the answers to every possible and hypothetical question.

But God does not always choose to give us this. He gives us all we need for guidance day by day as our limited scope and duties require IF WE WILL HAVE THE WISDOM TO USE IT, and it mostly concerns our OWN personal character and conduct. This is where our principal work and responsibility lies.

We remember how the Lord wanted Paul to preach in Europe. But He did not tell him so. He just kept turning him back when he attempted to go in other directions (Acts 16:6-8). We must be wide-awake and alert for these guiding signs that turn us back repeatedly until we find the right path.

Then, at last, when Paul reached Troas, on the coast of Asia, there came the vision of the man of Macedonia, calling for help. Still no direct instruction, but a sufficiently clear guidance for those alertly seeking and praying for guidance, for, says Luke in Acts 16:10—

"Immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us to preach the Gospel to them."

The word translated "assuredly gathering" is interesting. It literally means "putting together." They put together all the items of guidance and reached a conclusion in which they had confident assurance.

And so Peter here sets out with these men the next morning, still not knowing just what he is to do or how things will work out, but trusting that he will be guided when the time comes.

He took with him six other brethren. It was clear from the visions and messages that he and Cornelius had received that there was to be an important development in the history of the Truth, and it was important for the sake of the Body that there be several competent witnesses.

Cornelius had gathered together his kinsmen and his friends. Clearly Cornelius was not just an isolated believer, but the nucleus and doubtless the creator of a harmonious community of godly-minded individuals. This present event was truly entirely of God, but still it was based upon Cornelius' earlier faithful labors in example and teaching. Here is how God works with men, and how men must labor to prepare themselves to be worked with by God.

Peter said to the assembly (verse 28)—

"Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation."

Truly the Law of Moses did very strongly teach holiness and separation and a very clear distinction between clean and unclean, living and dead, the people of God and the people of the world—just as the law of Christ teaches today.

But much of the ritual and regulation and restriction of the Jews was a matter of tradition and not of God, and we must be careful of the same surface and artificial tendencies today.

The separation must be of heart and purpose and manner of life. By tradition, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, but kindness to the stranger was a very prominent feature of God's Law to them through Moses, and in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus taught that in matters of help and kindness and human need, everyone in the world is our neighbor, and merits our concern and care.

We cannot be associated with the world's activities and interests and enterprises and amusements, but we MUST mingle freely with all with a view to helping, both materially and spiritually—especially the latter.

Such is the deceptiveness of our own hearts and flesh that we often find that it is those who make much of separation and "holiness" as regards to others, themselves spend their time in the world's silly and childish games and amusements, instead of devoting their energies to the Truth, and will join worldly associations for present material advantage. Let a man examine HIMSELF—and from the pervasive and subtle danger of hypocrisy, none of us are free.

Hearing Cornelius relate his experience, Peter said (verse 34)—

"Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him."

This was nothing new. God does not change. This was truth from the beginning. The Jews were not selected as something exclusive, but as God's medium of manifestation and door of hope to the world. And even in their wickedness and blindness they served this divine purpose, for consider the many devout Gentiles that Paul found in all the synagogues of the Roman world that he visited, and which became the chief fruits of his labors. And here too, it was the Jewish nation that had revealed God to Cornelius and led him to worship and obedience.

Then Peter, still not knowing just what course he was to follow in relation to bringing these Gentiles into the Body of Christ, preached unto them (verses 36-43) the substance of the Gospel and the Truth concerning Jesus as the promised Messiah and Deliverer and appointed Judge of the quick and the dead.

The Truth concerning Jesus would be the principal point Cornelius would need, for he was already a fervent believer in Israel's God and Israel's promises.

Then at last, at just the proper time, when Peter had done his part as directed, and gone as far as he could without further guidance, God once again directly steps in (verse 44)—

"While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the Word."

This, together with his own previous vision and admonition about calling unclean what God had cleansed, was conclusive evidence to Peter and to the brethren with him of these Gentiles' readiness and acceptability for baptism (verse 47)—

"Can any man forbid water that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?"

Recounting it later, he says of this moment (11:16)—

"Then remembered I the words of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

He had gone ahead with the work in faith and obedience, and at the proper time God guided him to the decision and left no doubts in his mind. So He will with us, IF we do our part faithfully, and walk according to what light we have.

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Verse 48: "Then prayed they him to tarry certain days."

And unquestionably he did, and this would be the first united assembly of Jew and Gentile in the Body of Christ, and undoubtedly they would break bread together in joy and fellowship before he left them at the end of those "certain days."

We hear no more at all of Cornelius, and very little of Peter, but a great and permanent foundation stone had been established, and in the wisdom of God and for the ultimate peace and welfare of the Body, it was best that Peter, the leading apostle from the beginning, be the one to establish it.

This was the culmination of Peter's work in the center of the apostolic stage. Till now he had been the leader and key figure from the beginning, but now it was time for Paul's work to begin, and build a holy edifice for the glory of God, upon this foundation of an open door for the Gentiles.

Peter had much more work to do, and a final testimony for Christ in the laying down of his life, but his public record of activity fittingly closes with this event.

It was not the end of controversy on the matter. There is never any end to controversy, but the foundation is there for those with wisdom to find it. Even Peter himself wavered on this same point on a later occasion, out of a well-intentioned but misguided desire to pacify agitators, and Paul had to correct him.

Truly we must do all we can to avoid offense, and every thing possible must be given up for the sake of peace if necessary, but the foundation cannot be yielded.

The very last words we have from Peter, at the end of his second epistle in which he spoke of his own soon-expected death, was high praise for his "beloved brother Paul," and commendation of Paul's epistles as "Scripture" given by the wisdom of God (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Then he concludes his final message, 2 Peter 3:17—

"Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.

"But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen."

—G.V.Growcott, The Berean Christadelphian, November, 1971