

ST. PETER AND CORNELIUS

– *APRIL 16. – ACTS 10:1-16,24-48. –*

CORNELIUS, THE FIRST GENTILE CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY – BEGINNING OF A NEW DISPENSATION – EXPIRATION OF ISRAEL'S "SEVENTY WEEKS" OF EXCLUSIVE FAVOR – ST. PETER'S VISION – "MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION" BROKEN DOWN – THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THE GENTILES – "WORDS WHEREBY THOU SHALT BE SAVED."

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord over all, is rich unto all that call upon him," – Romans 10:12.

CORNELIUS, the Roman centurion, was evidently converted to God and righteousness years prior to the incident which forms today's Study. Although he was a worshiper of the true God, a benevolent almsgiver, and although his love of righteousness and his consistent life were recognized amongst those with whom he had to do, yet something was necessary before he could be accepted of God in the proper sense of the word. There is a lesson here for those who imagine that a reverence of God and morality is all that is necessary to Divine acceptance. As Cornelius had these qualities in large measure for some time before his acceptance, the Lord's dealing with him may well be a guide for all who desire to approach Him in covenant relationship.

Although devout, as we have seen, Cornelius was not a Jew; and he realized that he was outside of the pale of Divine favor. Still he prayed to God. While we are not told for what he prayed, yet in harmony with the records we may readily suppose that he prayed for enlightenment respecting the Divine character and Plan, and for a closer approach and realization of Divine favor and acceptance.

Perhaps Cornelius had heard of Jesus of Nazareth, and was perplexed on this very subject. Perhaps this perplexity led him to the earnest prayers which the Lord saw fit to answer in a miraculous manner, sending an angel to assure the centurion that his prayers and his alms were appreciated of the Lord as memorials of his piety. The angel intimated that something further than prayers and good deeds was necessary. But the additional things the angel was not commissioned to tell. Cornelius needed to know of the Lord Jesus from the true standpoint. He must exercise faith in our Lord as his Redeemer, before the memorials of his piety would count for anything with God or bring him into the desired relationship and under the Divine favor.

The angel instructed Cornelius to send for the Apostle Peter, and also informed him that certain *words* which St. Peter would tell him were of importance – essential to his further progress in knowledge and in faith, and through these into Divine favor. The centurion's readiness of mind is shown by the promptness of his obedience. He not only prayed, but prepared to cooperate with God in the answering of his own prayer.

The three persons sent to bring St. Peter down to Caesarea, all of whom feared God, give us good evidence that this Gentile, who was feeling after God and striving to the best of his ability to please and honor Him, had not been hiding his light under a bushel. It had shone out not only before his family and his servants, but before the soldiers under his control. This is the kind of man whom God delights to acknowledge, whatever may be his nationality or the color of his skin; and all such are recognized of the Lord and favored above others with light and truth – ever since the close of Natural Israel's special favor. There is a lesson here that some of the Lord's people need. It is that they should let the light of the Truth shine through them upon all with whom they come into contact; that the spirit of devotion should pervade every family, every household, including the servants.

Evidently Cornelius was full of faith in the Lord. He did not wait to see whether St. Peter would come. He knew that the Apostle would come. He had faith in the Lord's promises through the angel. Accordingly he gathered together his friends, his relatives and his household – those upon whom he had been exercising an influence. Apparently they were like himself – earnestly desirous of learning all that they could concerning the way of life – the way of reconciliation and harmony with God. as well as all the principles which He represents.

END OF ISRAEL'S "SEVENTY WEEKS"

Meantime St. Peter, with all the prejudice belonging to the Jews for centuries, needed to be prepared to receive this first out-and-out Gentile brought into the Church. This was done by means of a vision. On the following day the Apostle, with six brethren from Joppa, went down to the centurion's home – "doubting nothing"; for evidently the Lord was leading him in the matter. Of all the disciples, St. Peter was the best one to be chosen for this work; first, because of his impetuous disposition and his zeal to follow the Lord's directions quickly and heartily; second, because, he being the oldest of the Apostles, and in many respects the most influential, his course would have the greater weight with the others.

It is difficult for us to conceive the prejudice which the Jews had entertained for centuries against any thought that the Gentiles might become fellow-heirs with them in the Abrahamic Promise. They considered it a settled matter that God's favor had been set apart to their nation; and that it could not possibly go outside of that nation to others, in the sense of making those others equally acceptable to God. These views were based upon three facts; first, God's Promise to Abraham, "In thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed"; second, the Israelites were not permitted to have general dealings with the Gentiles or to intermarry with them; third,

added to all this, the Jewish rulers had to some extent exaggerated these differences.

But now a new dispensation had come. The "seventy weeks" of favor to Natural Israel had expired; and the Lord began to extend His favor beyond the Jews – as we have already seen, to the Ethiopian eunuch. According to Divine prophecy, these "seventy weeks," or 490 years, had been specifically set aside as a period of favor to the Jewish nation. It had been foretold that at the beginning of the last seven years, "week," of that period Messiah would come; and that in the exact middle of those seven years Messiah would be cut off in death, not for His own sins, but for the sins of the people. It had been foretold that the prophecy would be marked by the anointing of "the most holy" at Pentecost; and that the end of the seventieth week would also be marked as the termination of God's exclusive favor to Israel. It was so marked by the sending of the Gospel Message to Cornelius and by his begetting of the Holy Spirit, after he had believed the Message. – Daniel 9:22-27.

"WORDS WHEREBY THOU SHALT BE SAVED"

When St. Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, the centurion recognized him as God's appointed servant for bringing this Message to him; and he prostrated himself at the Apostle's feet in worship. Instead of looking down upon the Jew, and instead of thinking of himself as a representative of the greatest government in the world, [R5879 : page 104] Cornelius was filled with the spirit of humility. The fact that his visitor represented the Lord called forth from him some of the same feelings that were filling his heart in respect to the Lord Himself – feelings of reverence.

But if Cornelius was noble and humble, the Apostle Peter showed himself to be no less noble and loyal to God; for at once he began to lift up the centurion, saying, "Stand up; I myself also am a man." St. Peter commends himself to our hearts by this noble course, by this refusal to receive unauthorized homage. He saved himself

also from a great deal of trial by thus promptly disowning supernatural honor and authority, by recognizing his true position – that he was only a broken and emptied vessel, distinguished only because the Lord had been pleased to fill him with the Holy Spirit and to use him as a vessel of mercy and truth.

Not many today are disposed to offer worship to fellow creatures; and not many – except high dignitaries of the nominal churches, such as popes and prelates – consent to receive worship. But all such have a rebuke in the course of St. Peter on this occasion. In our day there is little danger, perhaps, that any of the brethren would receive too much honor of men; for the spirit of our time is running in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, wherever a spirit of worship is manifest, it becomes the duty of the brother to whom it is offered to refuse it and to point to the Lord as the real Benefactor of us all – the One from whom cometh every good and perfect gift, by whatever channels He may be pleased to use.

Entering the house and finding a congregation of earnest, God-fearing Gentiles assembled, St. Peter asked the pointed question, "For what intent have ye sent for me?" Cornelius then related something of his past experience, his desire for fellowship with God, his endeavor to live in a manner pleasing to God, the vision that he had received, and now the Apostle's arrival in response to that vision, and his own expectancy that he was about to hear what had been promised him – "words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved." – Acts 11:14.

Cornelius was not saved by his almsgiving, not saved by his prayers, nor yet by the Message which St. Peter delivered. But the Apostle's Message – "words" – explaining matters, enabled Cornelius and his household to *grasp by faith* the great redemption which is in Christ Jesus – and thus to be saved. Saved at once from alienation from God, and from condemnation as sinners, they

received a foretaste of the complete salvation to be granted unto them at the Second Coming of our Lord.

THE ONLY TRUE GOSPEL

We note with keen interest the Apostle's preaching, that we may clearly discern the life-giving Message which he brought and from which Cornelius and his associates derived their saving faith. St. Peter's discourse was the same Gospel Message which he had delivered repeatedly before. The theme was Jesus and the sacrifice for sins which He accomplished when He died on the cross. It was the Message of the hope of a resurrection from the dead through Christ Jesus, as attested by His resurrection by the mighty Power of God. It was the Message that, our risen Lord having appeared in the presence of God for the Church, the Father is now pleased to accept sinners on condition of faith, reverence, and obedience to righteousness according to ability.

St. Peter's discourse was "the old, old Story," which to many has become tedious and distasteful, but which to every soul in the right attitude is the Father's Message of forgiveness of sins and of reconciliation through the death of His Son. There is no other Gospel; and those who present another message are not, in their service, ambassadors for God, messengers and mouthpieces of His Holy Spirit. – Galatians 1:6-12.

The Apostle Paul tells us that "It pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them which believe." (1 Corinthians 1:21-25.) That is, it pleased God to adopt this method of declaring the Truth respecting His Plan of redemption and to accept and justify those who would believe and accept this testimony. Today the testimony may reach through letters, tracts or books, or through oral preaching. It matters not in what manner the true Message is delivered and received; but invariably the Message goes through the human channel, and not through angels nor by the operation of the Holy Spirit aside from human agents.

We are to bear in mind these lessons of God's methods and are to apply them in connection with the affairs of life. We are not to expect the Lord to move upon or instruct our friends or kindred or neighbors, but are to remember that He has conferred this honor upon His Royal Priesthood. Accordingly we are to be not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord – serving the Truth in any and every manner open to us.

THE JUDGMENT OF QUICK AND DEAD

After telling the Message itself, St. Peter explained to Cornelius that Jesus had commanded His Apostles to testify to the people that it is He who was ordained of God to be the Judge of the quick and the dead. The coming judgment, or trial, of the world is an important part of the Gospel Message, and is not to be neglected in the preaching of the Gospel.

What advantage could accrue to the world through Christ's death if there were no future judgment or trial for them? All were judged once in the person of Adam; and his condemnation passed upon all. (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:22.) The world needs no further judgment along the lines of the Adamic transgression and its weaknesses. The judgment for that transgression was complete, and nothing could be added. The Judge was Jehovah Himself; the sentence was death.

But now the Gospel includes the fact that Christ is to be the Judge of the world. This signifies that a new trial for life is to be accorded to Adam and his race. This fact of itself implies a release from the original death sentence, a redemption from Adam's sentence, and an individual trial to determine which members of the redeemed race will be accounted worthy of life everlasting. Yes; this is the "good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people" – even though the Adversary has deluded the vast majority into thinking to the contrary – that no new trial such as Adam had at first

is to be granted to the whole world, bought with the precious blood of Christ.

All are witnesses that this trial could not have begun before Jesus became the Judge. Hence none of those who had died during the four thousand years preceding His earthly ministry could have been judged by Him. None of them could have been on trial for life eternal. All should likewise be aware of the fact that the world in general has not been on trial since our Redeemer was appointed Judge, and that it is not on trial today; that, on the contrary, the great mass of the world neither knows the Judge nor understands the Law, nor has any conception of the requirements necessary to life everlasting.

This agrees exactly with St. Peter's statement under consideration and also with that of St. Paul, "God hath appointed a Day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained." [R5879 : page 105] (Acts 17:31.) As the Apostle indicates, that Day was still future in his time; and it is still future. From other Scriptures we learn that this Day is the Millennial Day – "a Day with the Lord, a thousand years." The only judgment – trial – since our Lord's resurrection has been to the Church, to determine the question of life or death eternal. The Church, as Spiritual Israel, has had much advantage every way over the remainder of mankind; for during this Gospel Age this class are being "called of God according to His purpose" – that the more than overcomers may be joint-heirs with Jesus in His future work of judging the world. – 2 Peter 3:7,8; 1 Cor. 6:2.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Cornelius and his devout associates had been waiting for just such a Message of Divine grace; and as the words fell from the Apostle's lips, they were quickly and gladly appropriated in the hearts of his hearers, who were by this time accepting Jesus with the same fulness of appreciation as St. Peter himself. Their hearts being

thus in the right condition before God, it would have been appropriate for the Apostle to say to them, "Now, brethren, your proper course will be to be baptized into Jesus by a water baptism, symbolizing your full consecration to be dead with Him, as His faithful followers."

But St. Peter was not ready to make such a step, we may be sure. He was surprised that God was willing that the Gentiles should even know about the wonderful provisions of salvation in Jesus, which of itself would be a blessing. But he was not yet prepared to expect that the Gentiles would be received of the Lord on practically the same terms and with exactly the same manifestations of Divine favor as were the Jews. To make good his insufficiency of knowledge along this line – and as a lesson to him also – the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius and his companions without the laying on of hands – in the same manner that it was bestowed upon the assembly in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

St. Peter quickly learned the lesson; and undoubtedly his readiness to learn it was in large measure due to his humility and sincerity of heart, the fulness of his consecration to the Lord and his desire that the Divine will should be done in every particular. The Apostle and his companions from Joppa – "they of the circumcision" – were astonished at God's favor upon the Gentiles. Yet they were not envious. They were glad to welcome as cleansed, as brothers, all whom the Lord indicated that He had received into His fellowship.

The result of this outpouring of the Spirit was a grand testimony meeting. The record is that they "magnified God," praising Him, rejoicing in their acceptance, etc. Then St. Peter drew their attention to the symbolical baptism and the propriety of observing it. We are not given his argument on the subject. Possibly he explained that in thus publicly symbolizing their consecration to the Lord they would be strengthening their own faith, buttressing their own determination to live and die the Lord's. Possibly, too, he showed

them the beautiful significance of the water immersion as a symbol of death and burial with Christ and of a resurrection to newness of life in the present time, and to a newness of life in perfect bodies at the Second Advent of our Lord.

The Apostle then called for an expression from those present – especially from the brethren who accompanied him from Joppa – to know whether any objection could be thought of to show why these dear brethren should not be admitted to every blessing and arrangement which God had provided for His faithful ones – irrespective of their being Gentiles by birth. They had believed in God, had given evidence of their consecration and their good works, even before they knew of the Lord and His glorious Plan; and now they had been accepted of God, who had manifested His acceptance by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them. No objection being offered, St. Peter directed that they should be baptized in the name of our Lord. He had been sent to teach them, and he delivered his Message with no uncertain sound.

