

THE CENTURION'S STORY

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

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For some time blind people have been trained to navigate by themselves in the Midtown area of Palo Alto, just down the street from PBC. I've often seen folks being taught to use a red-tipped cane. The traffic signals there are equipped with voice activation that tells you verbally when you can cross the street. Banks in the area have Braille ATMs. It is inspiring to see men and women overcome the limitations of blindness, because loss of sight is widely regarded as a terrible burden.

In John 9 Jesus' disciples asked him why a certain man was born blind. Jesus didn't answer the disciples directly, but eventually he acted to heal the man. Using saliva and dust, he made clay and applied it to the man's eyes, then sent him off to the pool of Siloam to wash. The man came back with sight. The story ends this way:

“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind. Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, ‘We are not blind too, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, “We can see,” your sin remains.’” (John 9:39-41.)

There are at least two important ideas in Jesus' words here. First and perhaps most important is that he came into this world for the sake of those who are blind, those who live in darkness. Sometimes he encountered physical blindness, but always he encountered blindness of the spirit in which people stumbled and fell and injured themselves against things in life that they didn't understand. They couldn't anticipate outcomes. He said he came to give them sight.

The other important idea in Jesus' words is that there are some people who insist that they already can see, they are doing perfectly fine, thank you, and those people get no help. They refuse to acknowledge that they need it. If we insist that we don't have a problem then no one can help us with the problem.

With this in mind, let's continue our study in the book of Acts. We're at chapter 10. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4754) we examined Peter's story in this chapter. God spoke to him from heaven and challenged his prejudices. Now we will consider Cornelius' story. In many respects his story is the story of a spiritually blind man's being given sight. I hope we can learn from the dawning of the light in Cornelius' life. Peter, to some extent, represented the problem posed by the Pharisees: assuming that he already knew the ways of God and the purposes of God, since he spoke for God regularly. Peter had to be pressed to learn that he didn't know, and this story is also about his gaining his sight.

Let's read the opening paragraph. Acts 10:1-8:

Now there was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually. About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in to him and said to him, “Cornelius!” And fixing his gaze upon 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 certain tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” When the angel who was speaking to him had departed, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were in constant attendance upon him, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

One who fears God

Verses 1 and 2 introduce Cornelius. Verse 1 has a familiar tone. It's the kind of introduction you regularly hear when you meet someone for the first time. Someone sticks his hand out and tells you his name, where he lives, and what he does for a living. And so we find out that Cornelius was a centurion who lived in Caesarea.

Verse 2 goes on to tell us much more important things about him. He “[was] a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually.” This acquaints us with what he was like on the inside. We will observe this man going from blindness to sight. In John 9 Jesus made clay, applied it to the blind man’s eyes, sent him to a pool, and instructed him to wash. There are steps to Cornelius’ gaining his sight as well.

The first thing to pay attention to in verse 2 is the statement that he was a devout man and one who feared God. The term “one who fears God” is actually used throughout the book of Acts to describe a particular class of people. Dispersed from their promised land, Jews built synagogues in their new locations. Some Gentiles would go to these synagogues. These were the “God-fearers.” They were allowed to sit outside the open windows and listen to the readings, prayers, and songs. Sometimes there would be a place in the back where they could sit and listen. Without priests or sacrifices, synagogue worship focused on the Scriptures.

Just as there are today, there were many God-seekers in the first-century Roman Empire. They had been taught to worship powerless idols (Cornelius as a Roman soldier would have been taught that). They had been told that winning the competition is the way to life and joy and wholeness, and had won enough and lost enough to know that it wasn’t true. They had attempted love and have found that it descended into selfishness and sleaze and loneliness. And finally they said, “This is not working. What I’ve been told to believe and hope in, I no longer do.” Turning away from what doesn’t work and longing for the possibility that there might be a holy God who could be known is the first step in gaining one’s sight.

So Cornelius was a God-fearer, and like many others we will meet throughout the course of the book of Acts, he had no inclination to convert to Judaism. However, these God-fearers found themselves fascinated by and drawn to a God who gave good laws and rescued enslaved people, who inspired glorious singing and the poetry of the Psalms and the stirring preaching of the prophets.

Changed behavior

The second step we see in verse 2 is that Cornelius became generous in his giving and regular in his prayers. His hope that God might be knowable led him to act on whatever insight he had about such a God. That’s an important step. If God gives us light and we respond to it, he will give us more. If God opens a door and we walk through it, he will open another. If we are willing to believe the truth that we have been offered, more truth will be made available. If we act in faith, more faith will be born in us.

It’s important to observe that Cornelius wasn’t just reforming himself morally, as is the common practice in our world. Many people have spasms of moral reform throughout their lives. New Year’s resolutions are a good example. “I’m going to shape up this year. I’m tired of my sad old group of friends who are going nowhere. I’m going to get new friends. I’m going to lose weight. I’m going to get my house in order financially. I’m a mess and I need to change.” But we know that’s not what Cornelius was doing, because when the angels spoke to him from heaven, it is evident that his ear was already turned toward God. “What is it, Lord?” was his answer. He wasn’t sure whom he was hearing, the Lord God himself or an angel, but there was instant obedience and a humble answer to the voice from heaven. Cornelius was hoping to hear from God. Rather than just cleaning up his act, he was hoping that somehow the things he was doing would lead him to the time when he could hear God’s voice. So his response was beautiful and without reservation when God spoke. The eyes of this man were being opened.

Cornelius’ experience reminds me of my mother’s. My mother came to faith in Christ in her mid-forties through the influence of her children, who came to Christ as teenagers. I remember how easy the transition was for her. The woman I had grown up admiring and loving was funny and generous. She cared about people. She insisted that those in her charge act responsibly, and even respect God. We didn’t go to church very much, but I remember my mother’s playing gospel records on Sunday mornings. At Christmas she wanted us to respect God instead of just being passionate about presents. And then when the opportunity to actually believe in Christ came, it wasn’t much of a step to cross over and give her life to the Lord.

What are some lessons from Cornelius’ story that will help us?

What we are to speak

First, we might do well to note that angels don't preach the gospel. It certainly would have been within God's power to direct the angel to tell Cornelius, "Jesus died on a cross for your sins. Believe in him and you will have life. If you have any questions, ask me." But the angel didn't do that. Even when Saul was knocked to the ground by a voice from heaven, he was told of Ananias, a man in Damascus who would give him knowledge of salvation, help him be baptized, and welcome him into the Christian church (see Discovery Paper 4752). It's people like us that God calls to tell folks of his love. We need to expect him to do so and to take up the privilege when it is offered. He is already at work, lighting the darkness, wooing people, opening hearts to believe. Folks like us have the opportunity just as Peter did to say, "This is who Jesus is. This is what his death accomplished. And you have the opportunity to believe it. The invitation is open." And then the Spirit will descend on the hearers.

Another lesson we can learn from Cornelius' story is that we shouldn't talk too much. I learned to share the gospel using lengthy arguments and a series of steps to follow for someone to understand the faith, believe it, and be invited to know Christ. But the longer I've lived and the more I see the ways of God, the more sure I am that the best thing to do first is to listen, not offer ten reasons for the historicity of the resurrection and for the reliability of the New Testament documents. We will not read the final paragraphs of this chapter (I encourage you to read the whole story yourself in your Bible), but in them all of Cornelius' friends and family were gathered and Peter was ready to preach. In verse 33 the invitation from Cornelius was this: "We are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." That is a very important sentence. It points out that the thing to say in a particular setting is what God has given you to say, not necessarily the long speech that you've rehearsed in some other setting. God is calling on you to say something just for this gathering, this person, on this occasion. And it requires some listening in order to know what that is.

A third lesson from Cornelius' story is that if we shouldn't say too much, we also shouldn't say too little. One of the misconceptions that occurs too often, sadly, is that if people just have kind intentions and are sincere, if they have religious sensibilities and, like Cornelius, have routines of prayer and give generously to others, if they are respected and well liked, that is really all God requires for them to be saved. But clearly Cornelius' story tells the opposite: these things, rather, mark them as clear candidates to hear the gospel preached, and to be invited to not only take the initial steps of coming to sight, but to actually be revolutionized, to have their eyes opened and everything changed. We need to call people to a response, to invite them to make a choice: "Let the love of God, which has always been there for you, change you; respond to Jesus as Lord and follow him; receive peace from heaven, because Jesus is Lord of all" (as Peter said in verse 36).

As I mentioned, in this story Peter was similar to the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking in John 9. He thought he knew more than he did. He assumed he understood the ways of God and could speak of them without having to learn new things. So he needed the Lord to challenge him: "You don't know what you are talking about. You don't understand what I am about to do next. The wind of the Spirit is blowing in places you haven't even imagined it would blow. You need to observe what I'm doing and join me, rather than insist that I act according to your rigid expectations." And of course once the challenge was offered, Peter responded beautifully.

So what did Peter learn about the blindness he had that needed to be removed?

Following God's unexpected ways

Verses 27-29:

As he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me."

An important tension is highlighted in Peter's words. He began, "It is not lawful for me to set foot in this house." It was forbidden, and in serious terms, for Jews who would follow God in accordance with their religion, to enter the home of Gentiles and participate in familiar fellowship with them, or to enjoy the company of Gentiles in their own homes. Yet, Peter realized, it was the will of God.

That kind of tension shows up often for us. We have boundaries in place, restrictions and definitions and directions that are pretty clear to us, as to how we should and shouldn't act. But the challenge to Peter was that staying inside such boundaries was not the will of God. What familiar boundaries might the Lord intend for us to cross in serving him?

If we serve the Lord, follow his leading, and are willing to be an ambassador with a good message for people who want to hear it, they will be changed by what we say. The process of their responding to the light and being given more and more light will end with new faith in Christ. But this is not a routine procedure done in some automatic way. We too will be changed by the process of participating with God in seeing the world change. We will grow and learn. The scales will fall from our eyes at the same time we offer other people the opportunity to see God clearly for the first time.

This church had its beginnings in evangelistic Bible classes. Folks were invited to come to somebody's home, the Bible would be opened and read, and they would ask questions. They might say, "I like these ideas here, but this other whole part I don't like. It seems ridiculous. Do you really believe that? Why?" Questions were encouraged. Somebody could walk away for a while in a huff and come back later. The point is that the text was taken seriously in an open setting. Questions would be asked, and no one knew what would come of it. The fellowship grew as folks in that kind of an environment were able to hear God and respond over time. Just as the Gentiles sitting outside the synagogue windows and listening to the Bible found themselves wanting more and more, so did these folks, and hope was born, and in response more was given to them.

Perhaps you are one of these people. Perhaps you're saying, "I can't believe all of it, but I want to believe more of it than I do. I wish it were true." If that describes you, I want to offer you a blessing. You are on the right track, and we would like to help. If you have questions, I hope we can answer them for you. If there is a response you are ready to make, we want to invite you to make it, but if you are not ready, questions are okay. The process you are in is a good process. If you believe what you can, you will be able to believe more. If you obey what you can, you'll be able to obey more. I hope you will recognize in Cornelius' story the love of God. His love is the same now as it ever was.

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