

Acts 10:1-8

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The Lord Tells a Centurion to Seek Out Peter

A centurion named Cornelius worships the God of Israel and financially supports the Jewish people in the city of Caesarea. An angel visits him and tells him that God has taken note of his prayers, and to send for a man named Simon Peter who is about 30 miles south in Joppa. Cornelius obeys and sends some servants on the errand.

The church is experiencing a time of peace now that Saul the Pharisee has come to faith in Christ. He was the spearhead of the Jewish elites' campaign to destroy those who had believed in Jesus, but after Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Saul changed sides, committing his life to preach the gospel rather than silence it. Several years have passed, and Saul has relocated to the city of Tarsus to avoid conflict in Jerusalem. Tarsus is Saul's hometown in the province of Cilicia, which is a part of modern-day Turkey.

The church of Jerusalem has rebuilt its numbers now that the persecution has stalled (Acts 9:31). This has allowed Peter to travel and visit other churches across the entire Promised Land. He healed a paralytic in Lydda, then made his way to the city of Joppa on the Israeli coast of the Mediterranean Sea. In Joppa, Peter (by the power of Christ) raised a woman named Tabitha from the dead, which caused many of the citizens of Joppa to believe in Jesus. After this miracle, Peter rested from his travels, and "stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon" (Acts 9:43).

*Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort (v. 1). Caesarea (also called Caesarea Maritima) was another coastal city a little more than 30 miles north of Joppa ([see map](#)). During his reign, Herod the Great built upon a village already there and made *Caesarea* into an important harbor for trade, naming it after Caesar August as a means of winning favor from the emperor. *Caesarea* soon became Rome's capital for the province of Judaea. It accordingly contained the headquarters for the governor. This then supplanted Jerusalem as the primary seat of Roman power; Jerusalem was further inland and up a steep climb into the hills. Caesarea was more convenient to Rome, being on the coast.*

Years before, Philip the Evangelist ended his coastal mission trip in *Caesarea* in Chapter 8 (Acts 8:48) and appears to have settled down there, since Saul/Paul (and Luke, the author of Acts) would later visit his home and family in Acts 21:8-9. The gospel was already being preached in *Caesarea*, and a church had been established there.

The man introduced here, *Cornelius*, is a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort. A centurion had one hundred Roman soldiers in their command (from the Latin "centum," meaning "one hundred," just as "century" means one hundred years). That he was a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort likely means *Cornelius* and the men under his command were from Italy, directly from Rome, rather than being of any other nationality or origin. These were Romans through and through.

Cornelius then was a high-ranking military elite. But it seems that his time in Israel had changed him. Luke describes Cornelius as *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* (v. 2).

He was *devout* and he *feared God*. His entire *household* too *feared God*. Perhaps he had come to the Promised Land as a military occupier, there to maintain control over a subjugated people, a polytheist believer in Jupiter and Venus and the dozens of other Roman gods. But rather than oppress the conquered *Jewish people* in *Caesarea*, he *gave many alms* to them. Not only *alms*, but *many alms*, possibly meaning he was continually giving *alms*.

He clearly cared about the *Jewish people*. There was no incentive to give charity to a people Rome had conquered—no apparent worldly benefit to Cornelius. This indicates that Cornelius believed in helping the Jews because he trusted in their God. He was a generous man. It is a strange statement, that Cornelius *gave many alms, and prayed to God continually*, because in the Roman society, you gave to someone who you expected to give back to you, establishing a reciprocal relationship. But *Cornelius* is doing the opposite of that. He is giving to those who cannot give back.

He believes in the Jewish God Yahweh, and it seems plausible that he no longer worships the Roman gods, since Yahweh is the Lord of lords and the King of kings, the only true God (Deuteronomy 10:17, Deuteronomy 32:39). If Cornelius *feared God* and was *devout*, he likely believed in the oneness and the all-powerfulness of God the Father.

However, *Cornelius* did not yet know of God the Son. Despite Philip the Evangelist settling down in *Caesarea* and seemingly starting a church there, *Cornelius* had not yet heard the gospel. He had heard of Jesus, of His miracles and His death (Acts 10:38), but he does not seem to know about His resurrection or that He is the Messiah. Caesarea was a large city with a population estimated to be over 100,000 people, a busy port where trade and a lot of Roman business entered and exited the Middle East, so it is understandable that Cornelius had no knowledge of Philip or his assembly of the new religion known as the Way (Acts 9:2).

Cornelius's journey to faith in Jesus leads to a moment that will impact the entire world. Up until this point, only Jews and Jewish proselytes (Acts 8:36-37) have believed in Jesus. God is at work arranging a meeting between Gentile and Jew that will have widespread and personal results, blessing the entire world while affecting the personal lives of Cornelius and Peter.

The Roman-born Cornelius has for some time sought God and honored His chosen people. He *prayed continually* to the Lord, daily, hourly, ongoing, with devotion. God responds.

About the ninth hour of the day (around 3:00 in the afternoon) Cornelius *clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!"* (v 3).

This vision occurs while Cornelius is praying. God speaks to Cornelius in the midst of his time of prayer in the afternoon. He speaks to the Roman through one of His angels.

During Jesus's ministry on earth, angels made few to no appearances other than to strengthen God's Messiah (Matthew 4:11, Luke 22:43). This might have been because Jesus, the Son of God and second person of the Trinity, packed all the power of God that was needed for that period of time. Angels were surely still about God's business, but only appeared to explain things to humans when Jesus was not present (such as right after His resurrection and ascension, Matthew 28:2-7, Acts 1:9-11).

Jewish tradition held that the law of Moses came through the agency of angels (Hebrews 2:2). When Jesus spoke, He fulfilled the prophetic promise that God would speak directly to His people through a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18). Jesus was like Moses (a human speaking God's word) but was also God Himself. Therefore, Jesus spoke directly, not through angelic messengers.

Jesus was the one who spoke God's words and revealed God's will to those who would listen (John 8:28, John 14:10, Matthew 11:15). But now that Christ has ascended to heaven, God works through the Holy Spirit and by means of His messengers (Greek, "angelos"). The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the Helper who indwells believers and leads them to walk in God's will (John 16:7). The events of the Book of Acts are largely attributable to the Holy Spirit's work directing the apostles. And God's spiritual servants, the angels, have been busy throughout Acts, freeing the apostles from prison (Acts 5:19-20), guiding their mission work (Acts 8:26), and here, kickstarting the process for Cornelius and Peter to meet one another.

This *angel of God* appears *in a vision*, meaning only Cornelius saw him, seeming to walk through the door (*he saw the angel of God who had just come in*). The angel calls to Cornelius, showing that he knows his name and comes with familiarity and purpose, "*Cornelius!*"

Cornelius has the typical human reaction to an angelic visitation—he was *much alarmed*. The prophet Daniel often fainted when spoken to by angels (Daniel 10:8-9, 15). However, Cornelius did not run away or doubt his eyes, being a believer in the one true God, rather, he answered the angel while *fixing his gaze on him*. He stared at the angel and refused to look away, despite being *alarmed*. *Cornelius* asked, "*What is it, Lord?*" (v. 4) "What do you want of me? I'm here." Perhaps Cornelius's training as a Roman soldier gave him the courage to stare (*gaze*) right at the angel and ask him his bidding.

His calling the angel *Lord* may be that he knew the angel spoke on the *Lord's* behalf. The Greek word translated Lord is "kyrios" which means "superior" or "master." Jesus used the term when He said that we can't have two masters ("kyrios") so we must choose between God and money (Matthew 6:24). So *Cornelius* could simply be acknowledging that he is in the presence of his superior, and was asking for "orders" as he was trained to do.

That Cornelius was *fixing his gaze on* the angel is all the more remarkable when we consider that even the Apostle John, who was one of Jesus's closest friends on earth, found himself bowing before the messengers of God and receiving correction from them when he was shown visions of the end times (Revelation 22:8-9).

And the angel said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (v. 4). First, the *angel* gives the man some encouragement, and something of an explanation for why he’s appearing before Cornelius. It seems to be a custom among angels to tell the one they’re visiting up front why God is speaking to them (Daniel 8:16-17, 10:12, Luke 1:13, 30-31, Luke 2:10).

The cause for this visit to Cornelius is that God has listened to him. God is pleased by his *prayers and alms*. Cornelius’s *prayers*, his petitions and praises to God, and his *alms*, the charitable financial aid he has given the *Jewish people* in *Caesarea*, have gone up to Heaven, they *have ascended*.

This brings to mind the way the sacrifices of the Mosaic Law were intended to ascend to God and please Him. In the Old Testament, food sacrifices done in obedience or repentance to God were described as going up to Heaven as a “soothing aroma” before God (Genesis 8:21, Leviticus 1:17, 3:5, 3:16). In fact, the Hebrew word “olah” that is translated to English as “burnt offering” literally meant “ascent” ([see our commentary on Numbers 6:13-20](#)). Both in the Old Testament as well as the New, it was not literally the cooking of meat God desired to smell, but the heart behind it, someone seeking to know God and trust in Him (Hosea 6:6, Psalm 51:16-19).

It should be no surprise that God is pleased when men do what is right in His eyes, when they share what they have, when they love their neighbor as themselves, and put the needs of the needy before their own. This sort of love and generosity goes up before God like a sweet-smelling sacrifice,

“And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”
(Hebrews 13:16)

“and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.”
(Ephesians 5:2)

God has seen Cornelius’s devotion. His *prayers and alms* are in front of God *as a memorial*, meaning He remembers it, it is special and noteworthy to Him. In this case, God has remembered these good deeds of Cornelius, and now wants to reward him.

After telling Cornelius that God is pleased with him, the angel gives the centurion a command: *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”* (v. 5-6).

The angel gives Cornelius the exact location of the Apostle *Peter*, down to the very *house* where he was *staying* in *Joppa*, at the *tanner named Simon’s house* on the seashore (Acts 9:43). The location of this house is not known for certain, but there are traditional locations that stand to this day ([See image of one traditional site](#))

And so the vision ends. God is at work arranging a meeting between *Simon Peter* and *Cornelius*. They are not far from one another, only thirty or so miles. Even in those days, it was not a great

distance. A full day of walking, or a day and a morning, depending on the walker. Caesarea, where Cornelius was stationed, was made into a seaport by Herod, who sunk ash-filled encasements that created a man-made harbor. Joppa had a natural harbor, and had been a port from ancient times. Jonah embarked from Joppa to run away from God centuries before (Jonah 1:3). Some claim Joppa (modern-day Jaffa) is the oldest harbor in continual use in the world. Evidence indicates it has been in operation for over 4,000 years.

Cornelius is quick to obey. He was used to taking and giving orders. He recognized the authority of the angel. Accordingly, *When the angel who was speaking to him had left, Cornelius summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants* (v 7). These messengers were men he trusted. The *two servants* were perhaps worshippers of God as well, since we know that not only Cornelius *feared God*, so did *all his household* (v 2).

The *soldier* sent to guard the *two servants* was *devout* as well, indicating that he was another believer in the God of Israel. These *servants* and the *soldier* functioned as *personal attendants* to *Cornelius*. They are with him constantly, they are dependable and loyal. Any three men would have obeyed their centurion's orders to undertake this journey and task, but *Cornelius* appears to be sending three men whom he not only trusts, but who also trust in God just as he does, and would be all the more invested in seeing the errand through.

Luke writes that *after Cornelius had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa* (v. 8). That he *explained everything to them* implies he told them the full story of the angelic visit. Since they were *devout* as well, they would go willingly and earnestly. They would go with excitement to see toward what end God was working; what this man *Simon, who is called Peter* had to tell them.

Biblical Text

Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort,² 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.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!"⁴ 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."⁵ Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter;⁶ he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea."⁷ 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,⁸ and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.