

The Salvation of a "Good" Man

The Gentecost accounts (Acts 10, 11) present how a "good" man named Cornelius and others who were with him were saved. From these accounts, we should note many key truths about how a person, even a good man, is to be saved.

Cornelius was a high-level military official in the Roman army. He was a "devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people and prayed to God always" (10:2). His servants said that he was "a just man, and one that feareth God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews" (10:22). These statements reveal that Cornelius was truly an exemplary man.

One day, he saw an angel of God in a vision (10:3). The angel came to him and informed him that his prayers and alms were "come up for a memorial before God" (10:4). The angel then instructed Cornelius about what he was to do. Because we are given *four separate records of this angelic encounter* (10:3-7; 22; 30-32; 11:13-14), we know that *God has greatly stressed to us this event in Cornelius' life*. Interestingly, we are given key information in the last record that is not provided in any of the others: the angel told Cornelius to send for Peter, who would tell him **words, whereby he and his entire house would be saved** (11:13-14).

Based on the information provided, **we learn many important truths about how this good man was *not* saved**. First, he was not saved by being a good man. Though he was an exemplary man in many ways, he still needed to be saved. His good deeds of giving alms to people did not save him. His being religious did not save him. His fear of God did not save him. Though he prayed to God continually, his doing so did not save him. His being just in his dealings with others did not save him. Though he was a model citizen who had a good reputation among all the Jews, he was not saved.

Furthermore, **though he had an authentic encounter with a true angel of God, that supernatural experience did not save him**. What's more, though God had heard his prayers and remembered his alms, he still was not saved!

After the angelic encounter, Cornelius immediately sent for Peter (10:7-8; 33). Peter came to him. Upon seeing Peter coming in, "Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. But Peter took him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself also am a man'" (10:25-26). Peter was the Christ-chosen leader of the apostolic company. He thus was the top religious leader among the disciples of Jesus. Cornelius met this supreme religious figure and did homage to him, but his doing so did not save him. We thus learn that **meeting and doing homage to any mere man, even the supreme religious leader of one's time, will not save a person**.

After Cornelius explained to Peter why he had sent for him (10:30-33), we read how Cornelius was finally saved. As the angel had told him, to be saved, Cornelius had to hear words from Peter whereby he would be saved.

Beyond their being a part of the message whereby Cornelius was saved, the first statements in Peter's message provide us with further information about how Cornelius was *not* saved. Observing how God had orchestrated all the events leading to Peter's preaching to Cornelius, Peter said that he understood that God was no respecter of persons (10:34), but instead He accepts in every nation those who fear Him and work righteousness (10:35). From these remarks, we learn that Peter clearly recognized that Cornelius was a man who feared God and worked righteousness.

By this remark from Peter, we see that the accounts inform us *three times that Cornelius feared God* (10:2, 22, 35). Cornelius' immediate response to the angel's warning to him that he needed to be saved displays his fear of God, as does his desire to hear all that God had commanded Peter to tell him (10:33).

From what we are told about Cornelius, we can be certain that Cornelius already knew and believed certain truths. Cornelius believed in God. His fearing God and desiring to be saved shows that He understood that God was the Judge and that he needed to be saved from His judgment (cf. Eccl. 12:13-14).

Peter then said to Cornelius, "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all): That word, I say, ye know which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached" (10:36-37). Peter thus informs us that Cornelius had at least some prior knowledge about God, Jesus, and the baptism that John the Baptist preached throughout all Judaea. Knowing these things, however, he was yet unsaved.

The remaining content of Peter's message, therefore, gives us the additional information that Cornelius had to hear to be saved. Hearing the full message (10:34-43), Cornelius was finally saved. God supernaturally testified to the genuineness of his salvation (10:44-46; 11:15-17; 15:7-9) that came about through his hearing the word of the gospel and believing (15:7). God purified his heart by faith (15:9).

Because God had supernaturally made known to Peter that Cornelius was now genuinely saved (10:47; 15:8), Peter commanded him to be baptized (10:48). We thus learn that **Cornelius was not saved by being baptized**; he was baptized after he had already been saved.

About ten years after the Gentecost event, two top church leaders, Peter and James, cited the Gentecost event as the paradigmatic account of Gentile salvation and used what God did then to resolve intense conflict among the believers about how Gentiles were to be saved (15:1-18). The controversy at this time concerned whether Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved (15:5). Because God had testified that Cornelius had been saved without his being circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses, the top church leaders recognized that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved. From the use that these top leaders made of the Gentecost account to resolve this supremely important question at the Jerusalem Council, we observe that **a person is not saved by circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses**.

From all that we have seen in the Gentecost accounts (Acts 10, 11, 15), we learn that none of the following aspects of or experiences in a man's life will save him:

- Being religious
- Fearing God
- Giving to charity
- Praying continually
- Being just in dealings with others
- Being a model citizen in his nation
- Having authentic supernatural experiences with angels
- Meeting and honoring the top religious leader chosen by God in his day
- Wanting to be saved
- Believing in God
- Knowing some truths about Jesus
- Being baptized prior to salvation
- Circumcision
- Keeping the law of Moses

To be saved, any person today, even one who is an exemplary man like Cornelius, must hear the word of God, repent, and believe the gospel (15:7).