

A.D. Episode 12
The First Roman Pygmy
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*They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was **divinely directed** by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you."*

*Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that **God is not one to show partiality**, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—"*

INTRODUCTION

Good morning!

We are in Chapter 10 this morning in the Book of Acts, studying along while we are simultaneously enjoying the new mini-series *A.D.*, and we come to chapter 10 today where a remarkable event takes place that pertains to everyone in this room...or at least 99% of us here.

It is an event that should be read in its entirety and appreciated by every church because it is at this moment that something takes place for the very first time that altered your eternal destiny.

It is a game-changer.

Chapter 10 in the Book of Acts is the VERY moment that the barrier between Jew and Gentile collapsed.

It's the Berlin Wall of the Bible. We just celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall coming down and this was an even bigger event because at this point we were grafted into God's family tree...the moment Cornelius, a Roman officer, believed the gospel!

Prior to this moment, the Jews were center stage. Cornelius is the first Gentile, representing all of us, who was granted eternal life! He is our Columbus of sorts, a pioneer, the first Gentile to get saved!

Look at Romans 11:17-21. Paul is discussing how the Jews have been "bypassed" because of their unbelief in rejecting the Messiah. He says, "*God gave them a spirit of stupor*" and grafted all of us, the Gentiles, into the tree of Israel.

Read with me:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

What grace! What a gift! What a privilege!

What happens here in Caesarea is a little hard for us to relate to in the 21st century, but think about the Middle East war between the Arabs and Jews, and the visceral hatred that exists there, and you'll get a glimpse.

It's like that; this intense enmity in the first century affected everyone, so to be including Gentiles in God's elect was an earthquake-tsunami on the biblical Richter scale!

Peter is the key figure here in the Book of Acts, the one with the keys to the Kingdom (Matthew 16:19) to unlock the Church to a whole new segment of the world, as he did at Pentecost to the Jews (chapter 2) and later with the half-breed Samaritans (chapter 8). Now God wants to include the Gentiles.

And this was really hard for Peter, as we see his lapses later on with his Gentile interactions, so God had to do something special...three times! It would take a miracle to break down the partition between these groups, so that is precisely what God did with a double vision to Peter and Cornelius.

Let's read chapter 10 together:

MESSAGE

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

What a story! Wow! Can you imagine what people thought when they heard this!

Look at how Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:14-16,

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Can you picture this burly foreigner in his uniform meeting Peter, the poor Jewish fisherman? A clash of cultures, wardrobe, mannerisms, and speech. Oil and water really. All of this stunned Peter, but not God. Remember what Jesus had said in John 10:16...I'm sure Peter remembered it.

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

And again in Romans 10:20, Paul quotes Isaiah 65:1,

And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."

So we see that this was nothing new. God had planned all along to make His salvation available to everyone,

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

So what can we take away from this fabulously entertaining story?

Two Points

There is a lot going on here, but let's focus on just two practical things.

The first is divine appointments. What we see in this meeting of these two representatives is a "*divinely directed*" encounter.

It is clearly God-ordained.

Before either man was born, God knew this would happen according to His perfect will. It was a divine appointment leading one to salvation, a man who was devout and sought God (verse 2), and Peter.

Now this meeting was extra special, as we have already said, because it opened up the gospel to us, the Gentiles. But it is something we can pray for in our own lives too, asking God to use us in the gospel in the same way.

Have you ever asked God for a divine appointment?

There are other devout people like Cornelius who do not know Jesus, people in whose hearts God is at work, preparing them to believe the gospel. They just need someone to share it with them.

Why not ask God each morning to bring you into their life? How would that affect your friendliness to strangers and hone your spiritual radar if you knew God was lining up

divine appointments for you?

Like it says in Ephesians 2:10,

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

And secondly, addressing a common complaint against God that unbelievers throw out all the time: *"What about the pygmies in Africa? How can God throw them all in Hell when they've never heard about Jesus, the Bible, or the gospel?"*

Do you know what the accusation really is? God is partial. He plays favorites. Some are set up to lose, so He'll unfairly throw them into Hell.

Well, we clearly see an example here of a foreigner who came to Christ in a miraculous fashion, an Italian soldier whose circumstances brought him to Israel, and who believed the gospel.

Sometimes this question is a smokescreen to get the "heat" of the gospel off of them or it may be a genuine question. You can tell by how they ask it, but most of the time it's just an excuse to not bend their knee to Jesus.

Let's answer this objection so the next time you're sharing the gospel in your divine appointment you will *"be ready to give a defense."* Remember to always bring it back to them and their responsibility to make a decision about Christ.

Perhaps something like, *"Well, the pygmies are a hypothetical situation, but for you, right now, today...you have heard the gospel and have enough information to make a decision. Is there any reason why you wouldn't want to trust Christ today?"*

But let's consider the pygmy in deepest, darkest Africa, who has no Bible, no church, no evangelist. Nothing. How can they be saved, and how can God be righteous to throw them into Hell?

Now you could say, *"Well, if you really truly care about these pygmies, why don't you get saved and go tell them yourself?"* But that's being facetious and they are really most likely just making an excuse not to believe.

So let's examine this question.

First of all, God does not "throw anyone into Hell." He lovingly made a bloody bridge with huge guardrails by His Son's death on the cross to get us all over Hell's chasm. We choose to jump off of His bridge.

God does not throw anyone over it.

Think of it like training your children. It helps to keep their rules simple. Maybe just three rules or so that would warrant discipline if they violate them. Let's say they are almost two years old. Toddlers. Perhaps your three big rules would be no screaming, no fingers in the electrical outlets, and no taking food out of the trash can.

You clearly communicate that these three rules will mean discipline...if they choose to break these rules, then they choose discipline. This is the deal.

Their choice, not yours.

They must decide what they want to do...break the rule and get punished, or obey the rule and carry on happily.

It's the same with God. He has laid out the rules and we have broken them, but in His extreme mercy He has given us a second chance. We, however, must choose to take it. If we do not, there will be discipline. He is not choosing it, we are. We are already guilty.

So what about those pygmies? Let's establish what we know from the Bible, and remember that the Bible is your authority. It is a weapon and it can cut hearts as it says in Hebrews 4:12, so be sure to use it.

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

If possible actually hand it to them to read the verse themselves. It is a powerful weapon. Even if they say they do not believe it, so what? If I point a loaded gun at you and you don't believe its deadly force, it will still have an affect on you if I pull the trigger, right?

Here's what we know to be biblically true about God's salvation provision:

- God is just and fair (Gen 18:25)
- God does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34)
- He promises to be found by seekers (Jeremiah 29:13)
- God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4)
- God loves us (John 3:16)
- God's creation is proof He exists (Romans 1:19-20)
- God gave all a conscience (Galatians 5:19-21)
- We all know we're guilty of doing wrong (Romans 3:23)
- We all have some degree of light (Acts 10:1-2)

From these truths we can establish that God is fair and has promised that He will make Himself found by anyone who seeks Him, whether pygmies in a jungle who have a plane crash with Bibles and missionaries...or in Caesarea like Cornelius who has a vision...God will find a way to get the gospel to true seekers.

God sees every single person on earth and knows their heart, and in immense love longs for them to be saved. How crazy to accuse Him of "throwing someone into Hell" unfairly. That is from the lips of Satan, a flagrant lie. God went to the point of death to save everyone. How foolish to accuse Him of such tyranny.

Furthermore, everyone knows God exists because of creation. We all see the stars at

night, the delicate wings of a dragonfly, and the miracle of birth. We are without excuse because God has advertised His work all over the world.

All of us know we have done wrong...sinned against our conscience and a natural law, whether by lying, stealing, or even murder. We have hurt people or been selfish. We know we are all guilty and need forgiveness. Those who want to be forgiven will seek their Creator Who will reveal Himself to them, no matter where they are living.

Paul addressed this in Athens in Acts 17:24-28,

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring

“He is not far from any one of us,” whether in jungles, Caesarea, or Tibet. We have no excuse (Romans 1:20).

APPLICATION

1. Pray for divine appointments. Ask God to bring you sovereignly into relationships at work, at school, and in your neighborhood where you can share the gospel with genuine seekers.
2. Be prepared to give an account. Know the gospel and some answers to common objections. 1 Peter 3:15 says,

*Always **be prepared to give an answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,*

INVITATION / CLOSING

[optional: insert personal story]

So in closing, ask God for divine appointments to share the gospel with people whose lives He has been preparing, churning up their heart soil for the gospel seed you can plant.

Will you do that?

Will you ask God for opportunities to share His good news with a Cornelius, someone who is waiting for a Peter to come and answer his questions?

I hope that you will.

And I hope that you'll be ready, prepared to answer their questions. Remember it's okay not to know answers to every question. Be honest, tell them you'll find the answer, and then get back with them.

Let's pray.