

Two Conversions

Saul of Tarsus and Cornelius, a Centurion of Rome, were from different ethnic groups and backgrounds. One is training to be a leader in the Jewish world as a member of the Sanhedrin. The other, a Roman military officer, charged with keeping the peace in a notorious, hostile environment. They worshiped God in different ways, based on their national heritage and education. Saul, a militant, very religious Jew, and Cornelius, a "God Fearer," worshiping God as a gentile and not subject to the covenant of the Hebrews. Both needed to worship God in Spirit and Truth (John 4:23), according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Saul saw Jesus, who told him to go into the city, and someone there will tell him what he needs to do (Acts 9:3-8). Cornelius saw a vision of an angel who told him to send for Peter (Acts 10:3-8). One point to note is that neither Jesus nor the angel could teach baptism to forgive sins. That job is given to people by Jesus. *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:18-20). Any attempt to give or accept salvation by any other means is futile and the work of Satan, no matter who teaches it (Galatians 1:8-9).

In Damascus of Syria, Jesus tells Ananias to tell Saul, who now believes in Jesus as the Christ, to be baptized (Acts 9:10-18). Both Ananias and Peter were reluctant to go for two very different reasons and needed encouragement. Saul's teacher, Ananias, is told that Saul is waiting for him. He was reluctant to go because he had heard that Saul came to Damascus to arrest, carry to Jerusalem, imprison, and possibly execute followers of Jesus (Acts 9:10-18). The teacher selected for Cornelius is Peter, who was staying with a friend in Joppa. His reluctance to enter the house of a gentile vanished when he understood the vision shown to him (Acts 10:9-23).

The fears which Ananias confessed were swept away by the assurance the Lord gave him. *"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake"* (Acts 9:15-16). Saul responded to the words Ananias spoke with vigor and an understanding which demonstrated his complete transformation from a destroyer of Jesus' followers to a teacher that Jesus *"is the Son of God"* (Acts 9:19-22).

Peter was equally affected by the message in the vision he saw. He not only greeted and spoke with gentiles but invited them into the house where he stayed (Acts 10:19-23). Peter understood that God now accepted some forbidden things under the Law of Moses (Acts 10:28-29, 11:2-3). Therefore, the next day, he willingly went with them to Caesarea and took some brethren with him to witness what was to happen. After the visit to Caesarea, he and the witnesses would be convinced that gentiles, cared for but not accepted as equals under the Law, were now accepted as brethren in Christ (Ephesians 3:6-7).

The sequence of events in Caesarea is used by false teachers to deny that it is baptism that saves an individual who believes that Jesus is the Son of God and is the savior sent by the Father. Cornelius and all that lived with him believed Peter's teaching that Jesus is the promised one and were ready to obey Him. Then a sign appeared. *"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were*

amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God" (Acts 10:44-46). The false teachers point to these verses to teach that salvation comes when the Holy Spirit comes to a person before that person receives baptism. The question is, why did the Holy Spirit appear to the household of Cornelius? Who needed it at that time?

Peter tells part of the reason in the conclusion of Chapter 10. Having witnessed a very positive demonstration by the Spirit, Peter says, *"Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ"* (Acts 10:46-48). Cornelius' family knew that they needed to submit to baptism. Peter and the brethren he brought with him required evidence that the Gentiles must be baptized to forgive sins.

Peter has much more to say about this in Chapters 11 and 15 because the Jews needed convinced that Gentiles are welcomed by the Holy Spirit to become children of God. The lesson for the Jews and us is that we can not decide whom to teach the gospel. God *"desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2:4).