

THE VERY FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMONS INSTRUCTIONS FOR JULY 8 CLASS

Vicar Walsh is on vacation this week, but thanks to our online-only format, we'll still be able to have a "class session" this week!

This class session will not be a live study. The regular Bible study sheets follow starting on page 2 of this guide. Participants can go about tonight's study one of two ways:

- 1) Simply use these sheets to lead them in their own reading.
- 2) Use the study video posted on Grace's YouTube channel as an aid in reading and working through the questions. (Linked below.)

<https://youtu.be/6xSZ4uk5ESU>

Having done that, participants are also invited to offer any comments or thoughts from their study in Grace's "Virtual Fellowship Room" Facebook group. (A Facebook account is required to access this group.)

Next week we will return to a live class over Zoom for our fourth session. Until then, may God bless you with good health and hope in Jesus!

-Vicar Walsh

THE VERY FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMONS

The Gospel is Graciously Given to Gentiles - Glory to Our Generous God!

Acts 10:34-48

Your name is Cornelius. You're a soldier, and you worship God.

You are stationed far from your homeland, and while the Mediterranean coastal city where you command an elite unit of Roman soldiers¹ may in some ways resemble your beloved Italy, you are constantly made aware of your status as an unwanted outsider - a "Gentile".

Not everyone is openly hostile to you and your men and your family; in fact, there are quite a few whose welcoming grace and kindness toward you is a great comfort. Yet even in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, you are aware of the way that this country and its people continually chafe under the rule of the empire you represent. In fact, according to the rules that the God of this people laid down thousands of years before, they ought to shun and mark you for avoidance!

Yet - somehow - you have come to worship that very God. What was it that attracted you to Him? Certainly not your Roman background. The exclusive claims to glory and honor this God demands from His people clash with the oaths you swore to Caesar and the empire. Nor was it the might and power of His chosen people. These Jews - "Israelites," they call themselves - pine for long-past days of glory, riches brought on Solomon's trading ships and peace won by his strong father David. They hold out hope yet for another golden age, when David himself will once again reign in Jerusalem. (Or maybe it won't be David? They seem unclear on that point.) As a representative of the world's greatest empire, this has-been nation has nothing to offer you.

No - it was this God Himself who attracted you, called you to Him with His words of forgiveness and love, His promises to cover over guilt and throw sins behind His back. Yet you are still not totally "on the inside." You and your family are out of place; branches grafted in. You wonder always - has He really accepted you? Is He pleased to receive your worship?

Acts 10:1-4. 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."**

¹ Cornelius is noted as a centurion in "*the Italian Regiment*," indicating that its members were Italians (Romans). Yet according to the historian Josephus, most of the "Roman" soldiers in Palestine were actually Syrian recruits. Some Bible commentators have theorized that Cornelius' men were part of an elite group of soldiers stationed in Caesarea, which (for the Roman government) served as the capital of Judea, rather than Jerusalem.

Getting Into It

Read Acts 10:1-33.

We'll focus on the sermon (*sermonette*?) Peter preaches in verses 34-48 in tonight's study, but tonight's online format makes it possible to do some more stretched-out reading and personal reflection. So to prepare for reading Peter's sermon, **having read the first page of this study, read Acts 10:1-33.** As you do, consider the following notes.

- **Verses 6, 23, and others.** Joppa is the same city where the prophet Jonah fled from God's call to witness to the Gentile city of Nineveh many years before. Now, from that same city, God commissions Peter to witness to Cornelius the Gentile soldier.
- **Verse 12.** The sheet didn't contain solely unclean animals; clean and unclean were mixed together, "all kinds."
- **Verse 9-19, 28-29.** Peter makes it clear by the time he arrives in Caesarea that he understands the vision God gave him. There's no specific passage in which God explicitly spells out the meaning for him; the words of the Spirit in verse 20 are the closest we get to that. Yet Peter shows by the time of his arrival that there's no confusion in his mind about this message.
- **Verse 19.** The Book of Acts has many passages that serve as linchpins in our Trinitarian understanding of the Spirit as a distinct person within the Godhead, not simply an "emanation" or a "force." See also Acts 5:3 and 9, 8:29, 11:12, 13:2, 20:28, 21:11, and others. These are useful verses in discussions with those who claim to believe the Bible yet deny the Trinity (ie, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc).
 - Noting all of those passages, we see that the Book of Acts has a special focus on the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the Church. We're reminded that it is only by, with, and through the Spirit that we as Jesus' Church are made able to carry out our mission.
- **Verse 33.** Words every missionary would long to hear! Surely Peter's heart leapt at this welcome. May we ask God to give us such opportunities to witness, and may we take them with joy.

Read Acts 10:34-43.

Vicar Walsh will read these verses in the prepared video for tonight; feel free to listen to his reading or to read these verses out loud yourself.

- **Verse 34.** Peter says that he “now understand[s] how true it is that God does not show favoritism.” Why might Peter have thought that before?
- Peter says that God “doesn’t show favoritism.” The Greek words literally say, “God isn’t someone who receives faces.” How does that literal translation help explain both “favoritism” and the character of our God?
- **Verse 36.** Despite the fact that Peter is talking to Gentiles about their acceptance by God, he seems to spend a lot of time in this message talking about Jews and Judaism (36-37, 39). What was the role of the Jewish people in God’s plan of salvation, according to verse 36?
 - **Read Genesis 12:3b.** Why was Abraham set apart to be the father of a new nation?
 - **Read Exodus 19:6.** What role would the Israelites have among all the nations of the earth?
 - **Read Romans 9:5.** What does Paul see was God’s goal in setting apart the Israelites for himself?

God’s purpose in setting apart Israel for himself was to create a group of people who knew him and would share his name with others. His purpose in setting apart the Church of the New Testament remains the same.

- **Verse 39.** Peter says “we,” referring to himself and the believers who had come along from Joppa (verse 23). Evidently they were also among those who had known Jesus and his work personally.
- **Verse 42.** Jesus is the one who will “judge both the living and the dead.” What confidence can we have in his verdict about us, **looking ahead to verse 43?**

Read Acts 10:44-48.

Vicar Walsh will read these verses in the prepared video for tonight; feel free to listen to his reading or to read these verses out loud yourself.

- **Verse 45.** The believers who came with Peter were apparently prepared to accept that Gentiles would be saved through Jesus. That much seemed clear already to them. What happens next that comes as a surprise to them?

- **Verse 47.** The Gentile believers here receive the Holy Spirit before their baptisms. While some churches today don't confess the biblical understanding of baptism, distinguishing between "water baptism" and "Spirit baptism," what Peter says here doesn't have anything to do with such a distinction; he's saying, "God has already given them all the blessings that baptism confers; let's go right ahead and baptise them then!"
 - **Read Ephesians 4:4-6.** How many baptisms does Scripture name?

 - **Revisit Acts 2:38.** Who does Peter promise comes along with your baptism?

 - **Read Galatians 3:27.** What benefit is promised through your baptism here?

We can have full and total confidence that in baptism God has given us faith, forgiveness of sins, and the gift of his Spirit. Your baptism is a source of wonderful comfort to you! There's no reason to question its efficacy; its power comes directly from Jesus.

This event in Acts 10 serves not to distinguish between "two baptisms," but to remind us that God can give his gifts where and when he pleases. He is not "bound" to work through baptism. For example, we can be sure that someone who on their deathbed confessed Christ but was never baptized is in heaven. (Acts 2:21) Yet God has given us also powerful and efficacious means - Baptism and the Lord's Supper - by which we receive further assurance of our status. Do we wonder if we were ever really saved? Jesus was put on us in our baptisms! Do we wonder if our sins were truly ever forgiven? We have taken Christ's very body and blood, given on the cross to win that forgiveness!

A Closing Prayer

Praise to you, oh Spirit of God, for gathering disciples for Jesus from all nations. Praise to you, oh Spirit of God, for making me a part of that great congregation by faith in Christ. Praise to you, oh Spirit of God, for producing fruits of faith in my life; fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. By your presence in our hearts you have made us all one in Christ. Saints from every nation and tribe, every race and language, worship God through you. As we live in this world, give us eyes that see past skin color, language, national or cultural background, to see all around us hearts that like ours need the love of Christ. Give us words to share boldly the good news of Jesus, through whose name we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. May we rejoice in both the diversity and the unity of Jesus' church, just as you do, Spirit of Christ. Amen.

Bonus Material

Peter was bold as he went to Cornelius. He took to heart the lesson that Jesus taught him with the vision. **Read Acts 11:1-18.**

- Peter's actions were challenged early on by other Jewish believers. What does he share with these other believers that changes their hearts and minds about this?

Of course, we wouldn't be able to get through a story about Peter without him lapsing or falling in some way. **Read Galatians 1, 2:11-21, 3:1-14, 5:1-6.**²

- Why does Paul oppose and condemn "Cephas" (*this is Peter's other name; see John 1:42*) in Galatians 2? Why is it surprising, given our study in Acts 10, that Peter would do this?
- Peter's failure to consistently live out the lesson Jesus taught him with Cornelius reminds us to consider the ways that outside pressure may compromise the truth of our Gospel witness.
 - In what ways might this happen in your life?
 - Whom do you have who can be a "Paul" to you and tell you honestly, "*What you're doing does not witness Jesus well*"? Can you be a Paul to other believers?

² Or read all of Galatians - nothing wrong with that!

Read Romans 9:1-11:24 for Paul's explanation of the role of Israel and the place of Gentiles in the New Testament church. (And let's never forget that all throughout Israel's history, "wild branches" had been grafted in also! Rahab, Ruth, David's mighty men, the widow of Zarephath...)

WELS pastor (**and former Grace vicar**) Ethan Cherney's podcast *Dust and Breath* features this episode on Philip the deacon and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Because this event doesn't feature a sermon *per se*, we won't cover it as a session in this class; but as we consider Peter's sermon to Cornelius and his family, this meditation on that story is worth a listen.

<https://dustandbreathpod.buzzsprout.com/1071946/3665077-023-the-ethiopian-eunuch?play=true>