

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER ISA.55:10 FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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CORNELIUS - THE CENTURION

About a hundred years before the events recorded in Acts, chapter ten, took place, all of Palestine became conquered and occupied territory. In 63 B.C. the nation commonly called Judea lost whatever sovereignty it had. The Roman legions under Pompey swept like a flood into Jerusalem and massacred many thousands. Under the Romans there was systematic robbery of the Jewish people by means of taxation and tribute. In 40 A.D. revolt seethed everywhere in the land. As a rule, those who made up the Roman army of occupation were fiercely hated by the Jews.

Facts gleaned from the secular history of these times tell us that the Roman governor of Palestine had only 3000 troops (five cohorts) with which to keep order in the land, a small number indeed for such an enormous task. These occupying forces were usually recruited from Samaritan and Syrian mercenaries, who were quite unreliable and who hated the Jews they were supposed to police.

It may have well been true, as some historians have suggested, that Pilate himself appealed to Rome for a cohort (600) of real Italians to be sent to his capital at Caesarea, the resident city of the Roman governors, in order to establish order and guarantee a measure of physical safety to those Romans who ruled.

Of all people in the Roman Empire, the citizens of the Italian province were the most loyal and obedient subjects over which Rome held sway. Thus a cohort made up of Italian volunteers were in turn also loyal and patriotic. There were thirty-two of these "Italian Cohorts" stationed throughout the various provinces that made up the Empire. One of these, according to Acts 10: 1 was stationed in Caesarea.

Luke's statement has been severely questioned, but newly discovered records show that it is historically accurate. An archeological inscription shows that there was indeed a Cohors of Italica in Caesarea before and after A.D. 40. And it is Luke who tells us in Acts 10: 1 of a certain man named Cornelius who was a centurion of the cohort called the Italian Cohort.

He is described at some length. His name is pure Latin or Roman. In fact Cornelius was a Roman family name that was famous in history ever since the Punic wars (300 B.C.), being quite prominent among the Scipio and Sulla gens (clans or families) that dominated the Italian boot. This name alone is enough to tell us that he was not a Roman Jew or a Jewish Roman, such as we read about in Acts 2:5,10: and which many, in support of a theory, would like to make him to be. To be given the name Cornelius was a great honor, as it immediately marked the one who bore it as a member of a very important gens, and a man worthy of honor and respect among all Romans.

While it was true that some Jews did serve in the Roman army, both as volunteers and conscripts, Rome avoided sending them to Palestine as members of the army of occupation. Furthermore, if they served as Roman soldiers they had to be renegades and apostates so far as their nation and faith was concerned. In fact the time soon came when all Jews were exempted from military conscription for two reasons. They would not fight or labor on the sabbath, and since military maneuvers could not be stopped every Saturday, they fouled up the strategy. Then there were the dietary reasons. It has been said that the Roman legions marched on pork. Swineherds were necessary and numerous in each cohort. Freshly killed meat was always available. Herds of pigs could be driven as fast as the army moved, living off the land, foraging for roots, nuts, acorns, and consuming the refuse produced by the camp. Some historian has said that one word describes the success of the Roman army - "pigs." Only an apostate Jew could serve as a soldier under these conditions.

Another theory that is spun out of ignorance of the facts is that Cornelius was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. If this were true, it seems that Luke would have reported it, since he does tell us this of one Nicolas who was a proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6:6). This idea comes from the Biblical statements that Cornelius was a devout man, one who feared God with all his house, that he gave much alms to the people, and at all times prayed to God. These true declarations of the character of this man are taken and linked up with the false and erroneous ideas that all knowledge of the true God, the knowledge of His righteous requirements, and the knowledge of the privilege of prayer, held by any Gentile before Pentecost, had to come from contact with the people of Israel. This is totally untrue, and is declared so by Paul in Romans 2:14, 15.

Since Cornelius was regarded by the Apostles as a Gentile, and since he was uncircumcised (Acts 11:1-3), it is wrong for anyone to regard him as a proselyte. But since there are those who feel they must link him up in some way with Israel (pursuing the idea that one is nothing unless part of a group), they dig up a term from Talmudic traditions and make him to be "a proselyte of the gate," that is, one who is on the verge of coming in and becoming a Jew. This is a meaningless classification, no matter how many times it is repeated by men who are simply repeating what

someone has said before. This classification would make Cornelius to be ambivalent and uncertain, neither fish nor fowl. Either he was a proselyte or not.

The idea that before the Cross acceptability with God and a true relationship with Him could only be gained by making contact with the Jews is preposterous. Peter himself declared in the house of Cornelius: **"Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him"** (Acts 10:34, 35). Since Cornelius did fear God, and since he did practice righteousness, he was accepted by God. He would have gained nothing in position or standing by becoming a part of Israel as a proselyte.

The objective student of God's Word who gives "honor to whom honor is due" will recognize in Cornelius an outstanding example of that great, world-wide company of devout, God-fearing, righteousness-working, praying Gentiles that stood apart from all the corruption that surrounded them and lived for God in spite of it. These men and women were individualists. They carried no placards, they put on no special garments, and they did not organize. They were unrecognized by their contemporaries, and have been ignored by historians down through the centuries. Historians recognize only those who have a following, not those who follow God's leading; they take note only of movements and groups, paying no attention to the Godly lives of individuals.

One of the first of these we come upon is Abimelech king of Gerar, who lived 400 years before God gave Moses the law at Mount Sinai and whose fear of God and works or righteousness are recorded in Genesis 20. He was a better man than Abraham, and his taking of Sarah into his seraglio was simply the practice of the despotic rights of kings to take unmarried females, whether subjects or sojourners. In a dream God spoke to him warning him that death would be the penalty for keeping her. He immediately appealed to God that his nation was a righteous nation and that what he had done had been "in the integrity of my heart and the innocency of my hands." God acknowledged that his was the truth, declared that He had kept him from sinning, and revealed to him the way out of this involvement.

My conclusion is that if there were one such king and one such nation there must have been many more. And if Scripture is read in view of finding individuals or companies who feared God and worked righteousness, there will be more, even up to the wise men (so called because they were wise in the ways of God) who came to the Christ child, all of whom were the exemplary forerunners who preceded Cornelius, the Roman centurion.

Even though Cornelius would have gained nothing in his standing with God by becoming a Jew and being identified with Israel, he could gain much by being identified with Jesus Christ. In a simple two minute message, Peter, as God's

commissioned one, told him all he needed to know in order to receive forgiveness of sins, past, present, and future and stand in perfect union (peace) with the Lord Jesus. This message was short because Cornelius already knew every historical fact about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:37).

Many insist that Cornelius was a proselyte because it appears that he was already trying to live as a Jew, specifically that he was praying at the ninth hour, which was the Jewish custom (Acts 3:1). But Cornelius was not in the temple when the vision was given to him. He was in his own house (Acts 10:30). Furthermore, the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) was not only the Jewish time for prayer, it marked the end of one Roman watch and the beginning of another, and since Cornelius had no time-piece, he used the voice of the crier as a reminder to start the watch with prayer. The time is mentioned so we will know that he was not asleep. His experience was not a dream,

It is quite evident that when Cornelius first arrived in the land of Israel, he found himself in a strange situation. He was a God-fearing, devout, praying Gentile, and he was now in a land where the people were practicing a divinely given religion that included sacrifices offered in a majestic and beautiful temple. Was it now his duty or obligation to become one of them, or to adopt their religious practices? Not in the least! It was his duty to live as he had been living – to continue fearing God, to be devout, to continue praying, and to work righteousness. Thus when he saw the poverty and suffering of those who lived in that harsh land, he gave much alms to the people among whom he found himself.

He could pray in Jerusalem the same as he had prayed in Rome, so his constant supplication was to God. He did not do what most Gentiles did, pray to some god at every shrine in the hope that they would hit upon the right one and get results. When he prayed, he prayed to God, and this he did continually. But, even as the rich young ruler in Luke 18, there was one thing he lacked. He did not have faith. And the reason he had none was that he never had the opportunity to take God at His word and respond accordingly. But the outcome of his prayers and alms-giving is going to be a God-given opportunity to obtain faith, even the opportunity to obtain faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God speaks to him in a vision and tells him: "**Send men to Joppa, call for a certain Simon, surnamed Peter.**" Cornelius takes God at His word, responds accordingly by sending two servants and a devout soldier. Thus, faith is put to his credit in the records of God, and since faith generates faith he is ready for a still greater word from God that includes an offer of Jesus Christ, Thus he became the first Gentile who was given the privilege of receiving the Lord Jesus as his personal Savior on the basis of believing a message.

It was a polyglot group (one speaking many languages) that assembled in the house of Cornelius that day. The predominant language would have been Roman (Latin) but Greek and Aramaic would also be used. This created difficulty until God, as evidence of their faith in Jesus Christ, gave these Romans the ability to speak in and understand any language. This was characteristic of the Acts dispensation.

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