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The Centurion's Vision
10: 1-8

38-42 AD
The reign of the Roman Emperor lasted from 41 to 54 AD.

The centurion's vision DIG: What kind of a man was Cornelius? Since he was part of an occupying army, what is unusual about him? About this encounter with ADONAI? What was the state of Jewish-Gentile relations at that time? What did the Bible teach? What can you say about the division? What do you think caused the schism? What do you think God felt about the difference?

REFLECT: Has God ever done something miraculous for you? Is so, what was it? Why is that action significant to you? What does it mean to revere God? Does that describe you? Why or why not? If evaluated by how you treated others this week, what would others say? What memorial offering does your lifestyle present before the Lord? How does the life of Cornelius challenge you?

Chapter 10 is pivotal in the book of **Acts**, for it records the salvation of **the Gentiles**. We see **Peter** using **the keys to the Kingdom** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Fx – On This Rock I Will Build My Church**) for the third and final time. **He** had opened the door of faith for **the Jews** (see **An – Peter Speaks to the Shavu'ot Crowd**) and also for the **Samaritans** (see **Ba – Simon the Sorcerer**), and now **he** would be used by **ADONAI** to bring **the Gentiles** into the congregations of **God (Galatians 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:11-22)**.

This event took place about ten years after **Shavu'ot**. Why did **the apostles** wait so long before going to the lost **Gentiles**? After all, in **His** Great Commission **(Matthew 28:19-20)**, **Yeshua** had told **them** to **go into all the world**, and it would therefore seem logical for **them** to go to **their Gentile** neighbors as soon as possible. But **YHVH** has **His** times as well as **His** plans, and the transition from **the**

Jews to **the Samaritans** to **the Gentiles** was a gradual one.

The stoning of **Stephen** (see **Ax – The Stoning of Stephen**) and the subsequent persecution of **the** Hellenistic **Jews** marked the climax of **the apostles** witness to **the Jews**. Then the gospel moved to **the Samaritans**. When **Ha'Shem** saved Sha'ul of Tarsus, **He** anointed **His** special envoy to **the Gentiles**. Now was the time to open the door of faith **(Acts 14:27)** to **the Gentiles** and bring **them** into the family of **God**.[205]

The narrative begins by introducing the first main character. **His name was Cornelius**, and a resident of **Caesarea.** In all likelihood he was named after P. Cornelius Sulla, the famous Roman general who in 82 BC freed ten thousand slaves, who subsequently were so grateful they took his name. Our Cornelius may well be the descendant of those freed men.[206] **Luke** introduces **him** as **a certain man**. This designation frequently marks this person as remarkable in some way (see **5:1-11** and **34, 9:36-43, 14:8-10** and **19:13-17**). **Caesarea** was an important city located on the coast roughly sixty-five northwest of Jerusalem, and thirty miles north of Joppa. **Josephus describes Herod's building up of Caesarea into a major administrative city (Antiquities 15.9.6).** It was a seaport, the capital of the Roman province of Judea, and the residence of its procurator. It had an amphitheater, a hippodrome, and a temple dedicated to Caesar. Naturally, a large Roman garrison was stationed there. Among them was **Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Cohort (10:1).** A Roman **l**egion at full strength consisted of 6,000 men, and was divided into ten cohorts of 600 men each. A centurion commanded 100 of these men, and each legion had 60 centurions, who were considered the backbone of the Roman army. Being an officer in the Roman army would have made him all the more hated by any patriotic Jew. Like the other centurions mentioned in the B'rit Chadashah, **Cornelius** had reached **his** rank by proving to be a strong, responsible, reliable man.

Theophilus (Luke 1:3) would perhaps remember **Yeshua's** encounter with **a centurion at Capernaum** who was described as well respected by the Jewish community, much like **Cornelius** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ea – The Faith of the Centurion**). **Centurions** generally are depicted in a favorable light throughout the gospels and **Acts**. This may well be evidence of the success of early evangelism among the Roman military.[207]

It may be said that **Luke** goes out of **his** way to make it clear that neither **Jesus** nor **His** disciples were antagonistic toward the Roman presence in the East or

elsewhere, and that in fact even Roman soldiers found **the Way (9:2, 19:9** and **23, 22:4, 24:14** and **22)** appealing and worth joining.[208] Moreover, the Roman army functioned as an agent of "Romanity" through its observance of a calendar of official cults, frequently being defined as an "oasis of religious freedom" on this account. Some soldiers apparently continued to honor their local deities besides the official cults, with no hindrance or objection, a centurion living in Eretz (the land of) **Isra'el** could apparently openly adopt certain **Jewish** practices.

Cornelius was a devout man and worshiped **the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**. **He a God-fearer with all his household. He gave tzedakah generously to the Jewish poor (10:2a).** Since **God-fearers** could not go to the Temple to offer sacrifices, **they** commonly expressed **their** commitment to the local synagogue by serving as supporters and donors to the Jewish community. In **his** gospel, **Luke** speaks of another well-respected **centurion** who built a synagogue for the people of **Capernaum** (see above), perhaps as its main donor, **and other people dedicated candlesticks or lamps (Arak. 6b).**

And he prayed to God continually (10:2b). Jewish prayer customs in the house included recital of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) and Tefilla (Amidah) on rising and retiring (Ber. 1:1f, 4:1), blessings over the food and grace after meals (Ber 6:1ff), kiddish (the sanctification of Shabbat) (Ber. 8:1), and havdalah (the ceremony marking the end of Shabbat and the beginning of the profane days of the week) (Ber. 8:5). However, just how much knowledge of these customs **a God-fearer** would possess on the one hand, and practiced on the other, remains speculative.

The idea of **prayer** as the "service of the heart" **(10:2)** lies at the center of the intention behind all the sacrifices (see the commentary on **Exodus Fb – The Five Offerings of the Tabernacle: Christ, Our Sacrificial Offering**). A sincere offering of the heart is accepted by **ADONAI** as **a soothing aroma (Leviticus 1:7-9)**.[209] However, just because a person brought a sacrifice to the Tabernacle or Temple did not mean that it produced the desired result (efficacious). If the person's heart wasn't in it, if he or she was merely going through the motions of obedience without sincere repentance or gratefulness, the sacrifice was to no avail. People show up to Shabbat services or church all the time with unrepentant, ungrateful hearts, resentful of **God**, and their prayers bounce off the ceiling (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Cc – False Religion is Worthless**). Just because you sit in the garage doesn't make you a car.

In other words, **Cornelius** is described as performing most of the typical duties of a **Jew** (prayer, fasting and almsgiving) and was living up to the light **he** had. The promise of **ADONAI** is that if people live up to the light they have, then **God** makes sure they get more light until there is sufficient light given for a decision for salvation. Like **Ruth** in the TaNaKh (see the commentary on **Ruth An – Your People Will Be My People and Your God My God**), this **God-fearing** Gentile had accepted the two essentials of true worship. First, **your people will be my people.** Although **Cornelius** did not officially join **the Jewish** people, **he** cared for **them** as **his** own, and secondly, and **your God shall be my God**. **He** prayed to **the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.** Or looking at it another way, **he** had works stemming from **faith (Romans 1:5** and **16:26; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:10** and **James 2:14)** – which is how the B'rit Chadashah defines true religion **(James 1:27)**, as does the TaNaKh **(Micah 6:8; Ecclesiastes 12:13)**.[210]

Cornelius had a seeking heart; **he** had lived up to the light **he** had and **ADONAI** was about to give **him** more. This is the necessary balance to divine election – that **God** responds to the seeking, willing heart **(Isaiah 55:6-7: Jeremiah 29:13; John 7:17)**. Divine election and human responsibility are both the clear teaching of the Bible. Salvation is both accomplished by **YHVH** and commanded of sinners. Although our limited comprehension does not allow us to harmonize them, there is no conflict in the mind of **God**.[211] Because of **the Lord's** sovereign election of **Cornelius**, and in response to **his** seeking heart, **ADONAI** moved to prepare **him**.

*The difference between **Cornelius** and many "religious" people today is that the Roman **centurion** knew that his religious devotion was not sufficient to save him. Many religious people today are satisfied that their character and good works will get them to heaven, and they have no concept of either their own sin or of **God's** grace. In **his** prayers, **Cornelius** was asking **God** to show **him** the way of salvation **(Acts 11:13-14)**.*[212]

Cornelius was engaged in **his** daily **prayer** time at three in the afternoon, also known as **the ninth hour of the day** (three o'clock in the afternoon)**, Cornelius** was **praying**. **Luke's** reference to **the ninth hour** would seem to suggest that some who lived away from **Yerushalayim prayed at the same hours when the offerings were sacrificed in the Temple (Jud. 9:1).** This view is supported by **the angel's** description of **Cornelius' prayers** as having **gone up as a memorial offering before God"** (see **10:4b** below**),** which recalls the description of part of the Grain Offering in the TaNaKh as **a memorial offering** (Hebrew: *azkara*).

Likewise, **Luke** states that **Peter's** arrival at **the house of Cornelius** (see **Bg – Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius**) **four days** later was the same exact time of day when **the angel** had appeared to **Cornelius** as **he** was **praying (10:30)**.[213]



At that time, **Cornelius clearly saw a vision** (see **Bf – Peter's Vision: A closer look at visions or dreams**)**.** This was not a dream, nor was it actually happening. This **vision** came in the "mind's eye" of **Cornelius**. At the same time, it was so vivid that later **he** would say: **Suddenly, a man stood in front of me in shining clothes (10:30).**[214] In **his vision, angel of God came to him and said, "Cornelius!" The centurion stared at him in terror** even though **he** recognized that **the angel** was a messenger from **God.** Much like Paul on the Damascus road, **Cornelius** addressed **the** heavenly **angel** with respect and said: **What is it, lord** (Greek: *master*) **(10:3-4a)?**

The angel was quick to reassure **Cornelius** that **God** was aware of **his** piety**, saying to him, "**Like the smoke of incense, **your prayers and tzedakah (charitable giving) have gone up as a memorial offering before God" (10:4b).** The term **memorial** (literally meaning *remembrance*) is sacrificial language **(Leviticus 2:2, 9** and **16; Hebrews 13:15ff)**. **Cornelius'** prayers and works of **charity** had risen like the sweet savor of a sincerely offered sacrifice, well pleasing to **YHVH (Philippians 4:18)**.[215] **ADONAI** knew **Cornelius'** heart. **He** was a devout man, and worshiped **Him** to the best of **his** knowledge. But despite **Cornelius'** sincerity and devotion to **the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he** could not be saved apart from a correct understanding of the gospel of **Yeshua Messiah (Acts 4:12)**. **Ha'Shem** was arranging to provide **him** with that knowledge. Specifically, **the angel** told **him** to **send men to Joppa and call for Simon, also named Peter,** to distinguish **him** from **Simon the Tanner** with whom **Peter** was staying**. He is being entertained as a guest by Simon the tanner, whose house is beside the sea (10:5-6).**

When the angel speaking to him had left, Cornelius, in true military fashion, responded immediately. Still very much in the dark about what **God** had in mind for **him, Cornelius called two of his God fearing servants (10:2) and a devout soldier** (who was probably **a God-fearer** like **himself**) **from among those attached to his command (10:7).** The word for **servant** (Greek: *oiketes*) refers to household **servants** who were considered part of the family, as opposed to male slaves (Greek: *doulos*). The Greek text adds that all three **continually waited on him**, which is a classical expression for "orderlies." Therefore, **Cornelius** was careful to choose **his** most trustworthy **attendants** to go to **Joppa** and seek **Peter**.[216]

After Cornelius explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa (10:8). This was a long journey, probably traveling on horseback. **They** must have left immediately because **they** arrived **at noon the next day (10:9)**. However, why **send for Peter** who was thirty miles (48 km) away in **Joppa**, when **Philip** the evangelist was already in **Caesarea (Acts 8:40)**? It was because **Peter**, not **Philip**, had been given **the keys of the kingdom of Heaven**, and that door could not be opened until **he** unlocked it.

It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf that existed in those days between **the Jews** on the one hand and **the Gentiles** on the other. Not that the TaNaKh approved of such a divide. On the contrary, alongside the oracles against **the Gentile nations**, it affirmed that **YHVH** had a purpose for **them**. By choosing and **blessing** one **family, He** intended to **bless all the families of the earth, "I will bless those who bless you, but whoever curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).** So, **the psalmists** and **the prophets** foretold of the day when **ADONAI's Messiah** would inherit **the nations (Psalm 2:7-8, 22:27-28, Isaiah 2:1ff, 42:6, 49:6; Joel 2:28ff)**, **God's Servant** would be **their light**, all **nations** would flow to **the LORD's** Holy **Temple**, and **Ha'Shem** would pour out **His Ruach** on all **mankind.** The tragedy was that **Isra'el** twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hated, despised **the Gentiles** as "dogs" and developed traditions that kept **them** apart. No orthodox **Jew** would ever enter the home of **a Gentile**, even **a God-fearer**, or invite such a **one** into **his** home **(10:28)**. On the contrary, all interaction with **Gentiles** was strictly forbidden and no pious **Jew** would ever sit down at a table with **a Gentile**.[217] Yet, these three **Gentiles** were on **their** way to a **Jew's** house to sit down and talk to **him**! What might **they** be talking about along **their** 30-mile journey to **Joppa**?