

ACTS 11:1-18
ST JOHN'S; 24.4.16; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

You won't get to heaven on the back of a camel
And you won't get to heaven on a sheep
You won't get to heaven on a double decker bus
And you won't get to heaven in a jeep
A pogo stick will only make you feel sick
And you can't drive there in a car
A rocket in your pocket might make you see stars
But it sure won't get you that far

You won't get to heaven by saying you're a Christian
And you won't get to heaven 'cos you're good
You won't get to heaven just by going to a church
Though many, many think you could
A mum or a dad or a sister who loves Jesus
Won't get you there it's true
Oh you're in favour with the Saviour but this you gotta know
You need to find Him just for you¹

That verse could have been written for Cornelius! In chapter 10, we read that Cornelius was a religious man, who worshipped God. He gave lots of money to Jewish poor people, and was constantly praying to God. As that song puts it, Cornelius was 'in favour with the Saviour'. God was pleased with him. The angel who visited him told him so in 10:4.

But Cornelius wasn't saved! Cornelius had yet to receive the word of God. Cornelius had yet to receive eternal life. Yes, he was 'in favour with the Saviour', but before Peter visited him, he wasn't on his way to heaven.

Maybe that shocks you! I'm sure it would shock lots of good church-going folk. After all, if we can't get to heaven by going to a church, how can we get to heaven? If we can't get to heaven by being good, or by giving lots of money to charity, or by doing our bit for the environment, or by being there for our friends, family and neighbours, then how can we get to heaven? If we can't get our children into heaven by making sure that they're baptised and go to Sunday School, how can we get them into heaven?

This passage from Acts includes a number of words and phrases which can help us to understand what happened to Cornelius and his household when Peter visited them, and why it is that they were on their way to heaven by the end of the passage.

THEY RECEIVED THE WORD OF GOD

The apostles and the other believers throughout Judaea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God (v 1). They weren't expecting that, and when Peter comes back to Jerusalem, he has to explain his part in the story to the rest of the church.

The word which Cornelius and his household had heard is reported for us in Acts 10:34-43. Peter summarises what they already know: *the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, proclaiming the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all (10:36)* . . . Peter goes on to tell them about how Jesus was put to death on a cross, and how God raised him from death three days later. Peter emphasises to Cornelius that he and the other apostles are witnesses of these things – they really did happen. He ends his sermon with these words:

[Jesus] commanded us to preach the gospel to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead . . . everyone who believes in him will have his sins forgiven through the power of his name (Acts 10:42-43).

This is the word of God which Cornelius and his household received. They accepted Peter's testimony about Jesus. They accepted that Jesus is Lord of all, that he died on a cross and was raised from death three days later. They accepted that God has appointed Jesus to be our judge, and they accepted their own need to have their sins forgiven through the power of Jesus' name. Cornelius realised that he needed Jesus; he realised that without Jesus, all his religion and worship, all his prayer and charitable giving, was useless. Despite all his good works, Cornelius was still a sinner under judgment. And so Cornelius received the word of God; he accepted that only as a believer in Jesus would he have his sins forgiven.

THEY WERE SAVED BY THE WORD OF GOD

Peter tells the believers in Jerusalem what the angel who visited Cornelius had said: *'Send someone to Joppa for a man whose full name is Simon Peter. He will speak words to you by which you and all your family will be saved (vv 13-14).* Yes, Cornelius and his family were 'in favour with the Saviour'. The Lord is always pleased with people who are good and who worship him. But Cornelius and his family still needed to be saved.

To be saved means to be rescued. The Bible tells us that we all need to be saved, or rescued, from sin and its consequences. Sin is

anything in our lives which doesn't match up to God's standard – and God's standard is absolute perfection. The consequences of our sin are spelt out in Romans 6:23: *the wages of sin is death.* And the kind of death which Paul means there is being separated from God for ever – and when we're separated from God for ever, we're separated from anything that's good, for ever. So there's no escaping the fact that every single one of us needs to be rescued, or saved, from our sin, and from the consequences of our sin.

The full text of Romans 6:23 is as follows: *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* So, when Cornelius and his household were saved by the word of God, they were rescued from certain spiritual death, and given spiritual life. As Peter had told them, *everyone who believes in [Jesus] will have his sins forgiven through the power of his name (Acts 10:43).*

THEY REPENTED

After Peter finished telling his story to the believers in Jerusalem, we read that they *praised God, saying, "Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!"* To repent means to turn around and go in the opposite direction, to turn from sin to God. It's another way of describing what happened when Cornelius and his household heard the message of the gospel.

When we repent, we change completely both our mind and our will. It's not just about being sorry for the wrong things we've done, although that is important. It's about recognising that we deserve God's judgment for our sin; remember, *the wages of sin is death.* Repenting

is about turning from our sin and asking God to forgive us. Despite the fact that Cornelius was a good man who worshipped God, when he heard Peter's message, he realised that he needed to repent; he recognised that he deserved God's judgment for his sin, and he asked God to forgive him.

THEY RECEIVED THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

For Peter and the believers in Jerusalem, one of the most important aspects of this story is that *the Holy Spirit came down on Cornelius and his household (v 15). . . It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ (v 17).* For Peter and the others this proved beyond all doubt that God had *given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!* (v 18)

But we're thinking about why Cornelius and his household needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit if they were going to get to heaven. One of the works of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to transform us into the people whom the Lord created us to be, giving us the power to resist the temptation to sin. The Holy Spirit also gives us the power to serve the Lord and to please him. He gives us spiritual gifts so we can help to build up the church. Some of those gifts are obvious and supernatural, such as tongues, or healing. Some of those gifts are much less obvious, and don't have supernatural manifestations. Examples include the gift of administration, or the gift of encouragement. God the Holy Spirit deals with each one of us in a way which is unique to us, because each one of us is unique. But each one of us needs to be

constantly filled with God's Holy Spirit; if we're not, it's a sign that we haven't yet truly received God's word and repented of our sin.

CONCLUSION

Before he met Peter, Cornelius was doing his best. He wasn't a hypocrite; he was a sincere seeker after God; he was a man who lived his life the best way he knew. But he wasn't saved, he hadn't yet found the way to heaven.

The Lord understood what motivated Cornelius. The Lord was pleased with him. The Lord wanted Cornelius to repent and live. And so the Lord went to great lengths to give Cornelius the opportunity to do just that, and also gave him the honour of being the first non-Jewish member of the Christian church.

I can testify to the Lord working in a similar way in my own life. For a number of years, I tried my best to please God. But no matter how hard I tried, I knew that I wasn't living up to his standards, and I began to realise that I would never be able to live up to his standards. The Lord saw my struggles, and he came into my life in a new way; he rescued me, and helped me to understand that I couldn't get to heaven by my own efforts. The only way to heaven is to depend totally on God's love, on God's goodness, on God's forgiveness, and on God the Holy Spirit.

So, if you're working your socks off to please God, good on you. You're in favour with the Saviour. But remember that unless you've received the word of God, unless you've been saved or rescued, unless you've

repented of your sin, unless you're constantly being filled with the Holy Spirit, none of it will do you any good in the long run. If that describes you, don't despair, and don't give up. Just ask the Lord to come into your life as he came into the lives of Cornelius and his household, as he came into my life, and as he comes into the lives of all those who ask him, whether they've been leading good lives or bad lives up to that point.

Going back to the song with which I started, I'm going to finish with the end of the last verse, and the chorus:

. . . this you gotta know
You need to find Him just for you

There's only one way, one way

You can get to heaven oh yeah!

There's only one way, one way

That's through God's Son, Jesus.

He's the only way.²

¹ Doug Horley, [You Won't Get to Heaven on the Back of a Camel](#),
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² *ibid*