

# [ prayer journey ]

## :: acts 10 ::

Head on over to the book of Acts, chapter 10. This passage is good news for us, not just because it was the opening of the Gospel to the Gentiles at large, but it also has some great encouragement for us as God's people.

Acts, chapter 10, starting in verse 1 reads like this:

**Acts 10.1-48 - There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"**

**And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?"**

**So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.**

**The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."**

**But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."**

**And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.**

**Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.**

**While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."**

**Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?"**

**And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you."**

Then he invited them in and lodged them.

On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.' So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God."

Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ— He is Lord of all— that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.

Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? " And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

Great passage. Lots going on, lots you can cover here. This is such a pivotal moment in not only God's word but the history of God's work in the lives of mankind.

What I'd like us to think about tonight is the the theme of prayer in this chapter. Because, right from the beginning, in verse 2, we start getting references to prayer. We see Cornelius praying and Paul praying and the angel referencing it and you get a sense of the importance of prayer

throughout this situation. We know, of course, that the Scriptures are given to us as instruction *AND* demonstration of what God intends for us. Then, specifically we think about the book of Acts and how the book of Acts has no ending, because the work that began in the book of Acts is meant to continue today through the Church and the lives of God's people, wherever He has scattered us. So, as we see this theme of prayer, our desire is to take a look at what God did and what that means for us as His people.

But here's what tonight is *not* about: Tonight is *not* about bumming us out and saying 'we don't pray enough, we need to pray *more*.' That's not what this is about. That could possibly be true of individual lives, but quantity doesn't necessarily mean anything. Reciting prayers so we can say we prayed does nothing. Instead, I think it is important that we recognize that we, as a culture and as individuals, generally do not *rely* on prayer in the way that we can. And that is something I think we can learn about in this text. Because God has given us this avenue by which we might not only draw near to Him, but also receive *from* Him. And if God has instituted a means by which I can interact with Him in a special and personal way, then that is something that I should diligently pursue in my life.

So let's look at our examples in the text and see what prayer can mean for us as believers.

We're going to start with Cornelius, since he comes on the scene first.

Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army. Now, I'm told that there were actually different levels of centurion command. A regular centurion was in command of either 80 or 100 men. Scholars disagree. Our man Cornelius was a higher ranking centurion, according to our text he was over a cohort. A cohort was usually between 500 men and 1,000 men. So this guy is kind of a big deal militarily speaking.

But he loved the Lord. And you see in verse 2:

**Acts 10.2 - [He was] a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people and prayed to God always.**

Now, this story is about the conversion of Cornelius, the Spirit of God falling on the Gentiles and all that. But, we know that Cornelius loved the Lord. He was a devout man. He had faith. So on one hand he can serve as an example of someone outside of the Kingdom, someone not yet saved who calls out to God, but he can also then serve as an example and demonstration of someone who does love God and seeks to honor Him in their lives.

So, on the one hand, we look at him here at the beginning of the chapter, not know who Jesus is or what He had done, and we see that God hears the prayers of those who aren't saved. This is an argument scholars and theologians and systems of theology get into. Does God hear when sinners pray?

The answer biblically and logically is absolutely yes. If God *didn't* hear the prayers of unbelievers, then how could He hear us ask for forgiveness?

But, here in this chapter, the angel comes to Cornelius and explains to him that his prayers and his generosity were seen by God.

What we should take away from this is two-fold. Number one, we should take comfort in the fact that we have a God who listens and hears. This is a remarkable thing when I think about how inconvenient it can be to sit and listen to someone. You know, maybe you're in the middle of something and the phone rings and the person on the other end has something going on but you're trying to wash the dog or whatever. If we're honest, it's hard for us to listen sometimes.

Think about how busy God is. Orchestrating all of time and space. Yet, He purposefully reaches down to us and listens to our prayers. And then He answers.

**Jeremiah 29.12 - Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to You.**

This is an amazing aspect of God's character. And it leads us to the second takeaway, which is that we should encourage people to call out to God.

Eventually we're going to be in a situation where someone needs counsel about a situation or a struggle, and we're going to get to this in a minute, but the first thing we should do is encourage them to call out to the God who is listening. The God who's got the whole world in His hands. The Bible says that all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Our prayers are not in vain. They are heard and they are addressed and they are important to the Lord.

But then we can also see Cornelius as the devout man that he was. And we see that he made prayer a priority. In fact, the text says he prayed 'always.'

And as we move through this story, we see that through his prayer life, God brought direction. It was dramatic, the appearing of an angel, it was perhaps in a less usual way than most of us will experience, but God brought revelation and direction to Cornelius through his prayer. He had set aside time to meet with the Lord and so the Lord met with him there.

This is an encouragement that I find I forget. God has instituted prayer for us. *HE* invented it! It's His idea. And instead of thinking of prayer as something like, 'Ooh, I better pray,' we should see it as it is revealed in Scripture, as a meeting place with God Almighty. He fashioned it and set it before us and said, "Come talk with Me." It is a means by which we can receive direction in the paths that God has determined for us. The Lord has a plan for our lives, His desire is to reveal that plan that we might walk in it. He's provided the Holy Spirit to indwell us and intercede for us. And He's given us a constant place of communication, a place of meeting with Him in prayer, any time we want, under any circumstance.

And as Cornelius went to God in prayer, as he spent time seeking the Lord, the Lord then came to him there and said, 'Ok. Here's the direction I want you to go. I want you to send men to Joppa. I want you to see the next phase that I have for you and your family and your ministry.'

It's so simple, but we sometimes forget to rely on prayer and to rely on the Maker of heaven and earth. We discount what prayer is. But Jesus said, 'Seek Me first. Seek and you will find.' Then, all those other things are going to be added. The questions you need answering, the direction you're hoping for, the help that you need for a struggle or a difficulty. Those things are handled by God. And if we remember to seek the Lord then He is going to be faithful to reveal Himself and His plan and His power and His wisdom to us.

Does that mean we're all going to have an angelic visit? No. But God is demonstrating here that prayer is a place where He desires to meet with us, direct us, and encourage us. He's made it specifically so that we can interface with Him and so He *can* reveal His will to us.

But let's look at the other guy for a minute. Let's look at Peter. Cornelius had made prayer a priority and the Lord worked through it. The same thing was happening in Peter's life as well.

**Acts 10.9 - The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour [or, Noon].**

When you go through the book of Acts it's really remarkable how much time these guys spent praying. It was of utmost value to them. Not as an obligation at all, but because they recognized the potential of prayer and they recognized that God intended great things for our prayer time with Him. It is meant to be something interactive like we're seeing here. Not something just rehearsed and recited, but a conversation as we speak to God and then as He ministers to us by His Holy Spirit.

So Peter goes to prayer and we see some really great stuff about how the Lord uses that in the lives of His people.

First, you get a sense of prayer helping us prioritize our lives. Peter's there, he's praying, it's time for lunch, but *BAM* the Lord hits him with this vision and this interactive conversation. The text illustrates that Peter became very hungry and then the Lord gives him this vision about eating a meal. And what God is doing is preparing Peter for an important ministry that he was set apart to do. And, in that moment, it's more important than eating lunch.

For me, it's a small illustration that on this side of eternity we need to consistently seek the Lord for His priorities and recognize that our own priorities are not always what He has in mind. Nothing wrong with lunch, but sometimes God is going to put our plans and our regular life on hold so that He can do something in us and through us. But if we're cut off from personal fellowship with the Lord, if we're cut off from communication with Him, if we're content to just *exist* as believers and never allow our lives to be altered, then we're going to have some trouble when it comes to ministry and serving the Lord. Because, despite the fact that God is a God of order and loves to work and move through order, He also likes to shake things up. No better text illustrating that than this one I'd say. Prayer keeps us sensitive to what Jesus thinks is important.

That brings us to the second Peter point about prayer: Prayer reveals to us as Christians opportunities that God brings to us. You are not intended to receive salvation and then just exist in a bubble. God keeps you on this earth to bring Himself glory *and* to further His work. And so, God is going to bring each of us opportunities to actually do something with this life that's inside of us. And often those opportunities and moments are going to be revealed to us through prayer, as we open up a conversation with Him and He speaks to our hearts.

It's like when David went to the Lord and said, "Hey, do you want me to go up here?" God says, "Yeah go on up." Or the second time, God said, "Actually, I want you to do this instead."

We should get excited about the fact that as we go to God in prayer, He's going to be sending us assignments. Sometimes small things, sometimes great things. Sometimes prayer to God just leads us to pray for others. Sometimes we're going to be sent on a big assignment. That's up to Him.

Another insight we get from Peter and his vision is that Biblical prayer gets us into submission to the Lord. Submission is, obviously, essential to us, but we really need to grab hold of the fact that a Christian is called to complete surrender and willingness before God. But, none of us have achieved that perfectly. I mean, look at Peter. God asks him to do something and he just says, "no." Now, it wasn't out of anger, but it was an area where he was going to say no. No I won't eat an unclean animal.

And what God was doing was working out an issue in Peter's life. The assignment that he was about to go on was a tough one. Especially since Peter had some Jew/Gentile issues. Later on, Paul writes about how he had to come and rebuke Peter for more Jew/Gentile stuff. Not everything in the Christian life is easy, sometimes we need some correction, but God wants to deal with this stuff. He wants to come to us and examine our lives and say, "I have something incredible for you to do, but you're going to have to let go of this prejudice first. This bitterness. This anger. This materialism. We need to remove this and replace it with Godliness so that you can be the representative you're called to be."

Peter was going to have to submit himself to the Lord's will and surrender any cultural or spiritual prejudice he had in order to fulfill this particular mission. And going to prayer is a wonderful way of opening up our lives and our hearts to God and saying, "Ok, let's get down to business. I want what You want, so root out whatever is going to fight You for control of my life." Because all of us need to be more conformed, more matured, more corrected in this life. But God's not going to force us. He invites us, but He leaves the submission up to us.

Prayer also prepares us. God came to Peter during this prayer time and spoke to him and prepared him for what was coming next. You see it in verse 17. All of a sudden these guys were at his door and wanted him to go to Joppa. Because he had spent time connecting with God, communicating with Him, aligning his heart with the heart of Jesus, he was spiritually prepared for this surprise.

Life is full of surprises. Some good, some bad. God's extended to us avenues by which we can be spiritually prepared. Doesn't mean we aren't ever rocked or shocked, but God is in the business of fortifying us and equipping us for what's coming ahead. He loves to reveal.

There's lots here but we can only get to a little bit of it. We see in this text that it was by prayer that God brought clarity and counsel and instruction and direction and correction and mission, both to Peter and Cornelius. But they had to actually be willing to meet with God there and do what they were asked to do. It was contingent on them actually seeking the Lord and then acting on what they received.

And here's what happens in our own lives. We live in an individualistic culture, one where self-sufficiency is praised and expected. We live in a place where miraculous things are doubted and they don't happen as often as they do say in the book of Acts or elsewhere in the world. We're slammed by people and ideas who present God as angry and distant, not loving and near. And then, the Christian community sometimes hammers us that we're not praying *enough*

or the right way. And you know, eventually, whether we mean to or not, we start thinking that we don't really understand prayer and we get frustrated by it and we get a little distant from it.

But when we open the Bible, we find God presenting prayer as something that He loves. Something He's excited about. Something He's present in. An avenue by which He supplies wisdom and direction and understanding and filling and correction and preparation and clarity and help for His people. That's what He designed it for. And if we pass on that, then we are missing out on so much of what God wants for us. Because we all want those things that God supplies. God has said He will supply them if we're faithful to seek Him and submit to Him and serve Him. But I think sometimes we get influenced by culture or whatever to forget the importance of prayer and the potential in prayer. Not in a vending machine sense. But Jesus said, "Seek Me and you will find Me!"

God has a power and a plan for our lives. He's got a mission for you and a future for your life here on the earth. But He's set up our relationship in such a way that we must engage in order to receive what He's offering. The way we lock into our faith is not always easy, prayer doesn't always feel natural or easy, but it's always good. And if we're diligent to understand what God thinks about prayer and then apply it to our lives, then we're going to find those things we really need in life. And we're going to discover those opportunities that God is bringing to us.

So what do we do? How do we actually apply this?

You want to lose weight, you got to exercise. You want a hot meal, you've got to cook it. You want direction and filling and opportunity to be used for the Kingdom of heaven, we've got to seek the Lord.

It's not just about clocking time in. That's not it. Because you could say a ritual prayer all day every day and it's not going to actually bring you into communion with God.

What we can do is adjust our thinking and start thinking of prayer as a meeting that God has opened to us. A place where we can pour out our hearts to a God who's *listening*. We can understand that prayer is something God uses to guide us and encourage us and bring direction to our lives.

And then, quite honestly, we can evaluate whether we're making prayer a priority at all in our lives, or whether we find ourselves sort of ignoring or even avoiding it.

It's not that if we don't pray God is angry. It's that if we don't pray we're missing out.

There are a few practical things we can do to search this out in our lives. First, tonight, we're going to have communion. We're going to spend time praying. I just invite you to enjoy your time in communion with the Lord. We get to talk to the Creator! Heart to heart. That is a wonderful thing. And as we pray, I'd invite all of us to simply ask the Lord a question with willing hearts. The question being, "What do You want me to do?"

And then, after tonight, I encourage all of us to measure our relationship to prayer. Not just time spent, but our attitude toward it. Does it excite us or depress us? Does it matter to us or are we neutral? Because God wants it to be something refreshing and meaningful and powerful for us.

And then we should see how the Lord might be encouraging us to meet with Him. Maybe that means coming every now and then to First Watch on Saturday nights. Maybe it means praying with a few coworkers on the lunch break every day. Maybe it means dedicating one Sunday a month or one Sunday a year and setting yourself aside to pray for our services in the prayer room upstairs. Maybe it means continuing on in what you're doing right now.

We are invited.

None of this is meant to be a burden. It's meant to be an encouragement. God has laid this before us and invited us in. And when we read a text like this we see very quickly that *we want in!*

Let's get before the Lord, understand what He wants for our lives and then see what He has next for us as we submit to Him and talk to Him and draw near to Him. The one who hears us and is faithful to reveal Himself to us.