

# THE MOTION OF DEVOTION

ACTS 10:1-8    MARCH 11, 2020

Reggie White was one of the most awarded players in NFL history. As defensive end, he was, arguably, the greatest pass rusher of all time. J.J. Watt, a more recent defensive end who was once called the NFL's best player,<sup>1</sup> talked in an interview last year about how he *still* studies footage of Reggie White's performance on the field, hoping to pick up a thing or two.<sup>2</sup>

If you know anything about Reggie White, you know that not only was he one of the best to ever play the game, but that he was an outspoken Christian. His boldness for Jesus earned him the nickname "the minister of defense." After his untimely death, one author wrote: "Perhaps no professional athlete had evangelized more often or more publicly than Reggie White."<sup>3</sup> Reggie's story is a remarkable one that teaches and inspires us.

In our text tonight we'll read about another man who is remembered for both his faith and his vocation. A man whose experience paved the way for Reggie White to get saved. In fact, our passage this evening chronicles a pivotal moment in the story of the Church, and, really, a turning point in human history, as the Gospel is made equally and officially available to the Gentile world.

Acts chapter 10 is somewhere around 8 to 10 years after Pentecost. But, up until now, the entire church is Jewish. There was probably an exception or two, perhaps a few more than the Ethiopian Eunuch who weren't born Hebrews and had been born again, though some argue that, even then, all those may have been Jewish proselytes. But now, something dramatic and unexpected had happened: The Gospel had been received in Samaria. These *half*-Jewish, ancient kinsmen of Israel were getting saved. But what about the Gentile world? So far, there had been no apostolic preaching to non-Jews. Even when the Ethiopian Eunuch was saved, it hadn't been an official invitation, but a spur of the minute, Divine appointment.

It's clear from the rest of Acts that there was no assumption that God's offer of salvation was going to go out to the Gentile world. In fact, for years some church leaders and Jewish Christians *resisted* the idea. At very least, they thought, Gentiles would first have to convert to Judaism and *then* be able to be saved. It's a battle the Apostle Paul would have to fight again and again.

But Acts 10 shows what God had in mind. He makes it plain and clear that the Gospel was for *everyone*. And the way that He does so is bold and striking as we see a man named Cornelius coming to faith in Jesus Christ. It's a significant event that Luke gives a lot of attention to. And, through this work, God makes some strong statements both to the unbelieving world *and* to the all Jewish church at the time.

Most of you are familiar with this story already and know what a remarkable man Cornelius was. We'll see he was a man of great integrity, of deep religious conviction. He was a man of generosity and humility. He was a man with a missionary mindset.

The truth is, good commentators find themselves in disagreement over when exactly Cornelius was *regenerated*. Rather than debate that, I rather us step back and take a look at something else from

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1633853-a-scouts-guide-to-what-makes-jj-watt-the-nfls-best-player>

<sup>2</sup> <https://clutchpoints.com/texans-news-jj-watt-studies-reggie-white-tape-but-cant-copy-his-signature-move/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.yahoo.com/news/reggies-self-revelation-230500053--nfl.html>

his example and that's that God was *pleased* with this man's heart and his behavior. We'll be told that God heard his prayers and responded to his efforts. I would tend to agree that Cornelius wasn't yet born in again in verses 1 through 8, but as born again Christians, wouldn't we say that we want to please God? For God to hear our prayers? For the Lord to reveal more of Himself as we seek Him? Cornelius is described to us as a "devout" man. Now we, Gentiles who have the additional benefits of the completed word of God, the lessons of Church history and the indwelling Holy Spirit, can be encouraged in our own devotion to the Lord and meditate on the kind of life that pleases the Lord. We begin in verse 1, where we read:

**Acts 10:1 - There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment.**

The opening phrase of this pivotal event is important: There was a *man*. A certain man. A particular individual and his family were the targets of God's work that day. I say that because the way we do things today is to target a *region* and set up a church or a ministry there. The metric you hear all the time is, "in this city, *this* huge percentage of the population is unchurched." And so, the reasoning is, God must want to establish something in that city. And, maybe that's true. Paul, we know, had specific *regions* he wanted to go to, like Asia and Spain. It's not that the Lord never works that way. But what do we see much more often in the Bible? We see God connecting *individuals* to other *individuals*. Philip wasn't sent to Ethiopia, he was sent to an Ethiopian. Even in Paul's ministry, churches were established *after* people got saved, not before. Had God wanted to be strategic the way we so often try to be in our own thinking, He would've launched the Gentile outreach in China, which probably contained 20% of the world's population at the time.<sup>4</sup> Or at least in Rome, which was the most important city. But the Lord was interested more in a *person* than a *place*.

That person was a soldier named Cornelius. Not just a soldier, but a centurion, in command of others. And not just any centurion, but one in an elite squad known as the Italian Regiment. The Lord was making a statement here. He was starting this new work in the Gentile world in a blatant, unapologetic way. Cornelius is the poster-boy for Rome: An Italian soldier, tasked with protecting of the governor *in Caesarea*, as in the land of Caesar! He's not just a *member* of the empire, he's the *strong arm* of the empire. If you wanted to get as far away from a Jew as possible, this guy is definitely in the running. And *that's* who the Lord was going to publicly display as the very first Gentile member of the Church.

This should encourage us in a variety of ways. First, that *anyone* can get saved. Second, the Gospel plays offense, not just defense. Third, we should ask God for the kind of boldness He has.

Now, Cornelius' career was impressive, but it's who he was as a person that put him on God's radar.

**Acts 10:2 - <sup>2</sup> He was a devout man and feared God along with his whole household. He did many charitable deeds for the Jewish people and always prayed to God.**

As we get into his religious life, let's remind ourselves that Cornelius didn't *earn* salvation or buy God's favor with good works. That's never how it works with the Lord. Cornelius, like all people, would be saved by grace through faith. But, we see that He was pleased with Cornelius. And in this verse we're given a lot of description about his spiritual life. There was a lot of *motion* in his devotion. In fact, *Vines Dictionary of the New Testament* points out that the term Luke used here for

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-life-was-like-in-the-first-century-2011-11>

'devout' is meant to convey a sense of energy and activity. Not just a mindset, but that Cornelius directed expressions of his faith toward God.

We learn that he was a man of prayer. A man of spiritual action. He shared his faith with his family and household staff. We'll see he also influenced the soldiers in his command. He was generous and sacrificial. He had a vibrant, active spiritual life at home, on the field, and everywhere in between.

Categorically, he would've been known as a "God-fearer," which was a classification among the Jews of a Gentile who believed in the God of the Old Testament, even attended synagogue, but had not become a circumcised proselyte. Therefore, even though he was in mental agreement with the teachings of Israel, he would've been considered ceremonially unclean and restricted from worship.

Despite being held at arms length by the Jews around him, and despite being undoubtedly *hated* by many as an enforcer of Roman occupation, Cornelius still engaged with the community of God's people, still prayed to the God of Israel, still sought God, day in and day out. He didn't know Jesus yet, and the Lord was going to take care of that, but during this time of great transition in God's dealings with man, he serves as a wonderful example of vibrant, God-pleasing faith in the Old Testament sense.

He's also a wonderful example of the truth revealed in the Scripture that, if a person will respond to the light they've been given, God will make a way that they receive more light. "What about the tribesman who's never heard the Gospel?" They're no farther off than an Ethiopian Eunuch or a Roman Centurion. The Bible promises "Seek and you will find."

**Acts 10:3 - <sup>3</sup> About three in the afternoon he distinctly saw in a vision an angel of God who came in and said to him, "Cornelius!"**

One thing we should notice throughout the whole situation is the amount of *clarity* experienced. He saw distinctly. He will be given clear directions. The same will be true of Peter's vision up next.

Why does that matter? Well, it seems to be more and more popular for people to make claims about visions or supernatural manifestations - that they've seen the face of God or an angel or something similar - and frequently there is a complete lack of clarity.

For example: Paula White is a name you might have heard. She's an author and peddler of the prosperity gospel. She's said to be a spiritual advisor and personal pastor to our president. She considers herself an apostle.<sup>5</sup> Recently she claimed to have seen the face of God in the throne room of God. She said she couldn't see it clearly because of a mist. What she *could* see clearly was the golden mantle given to her. So, naturally we need to listen to her and donate to her ministry and all that. There are many Biblical problems with her claims. But, other people and groups and books are making similar claims about supernatural visions. When you hear them, evaluate them. Pay attention to the details. Do they align with the teaching of Scripture? An encounter like this one between Cornelius and the angel can serve as a measuring tool for when *others* make claims to have heard from God.

Now, we remember that *Jesus* appeared to Saul in a vision. Why not here? If He wants Gentiles to be saved, why send an angel? There were two sides to God's work in this situation. On the one side, His desire was to save Cornelius and his family. On the other side was His desire to show the Jewish

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.christianpost.com/news/paula-white-installs-son-as-pastor-of-her-church-plans-to-plant-3000-churches-start-university.html>

Christians that Gentiles had full and equal access to salvation and the Church, not by first jumping through a hoop of converting to Mosaic Judaism, but through faith in Jesus Christ. There would be no difference, no exclusion and no pre-qualifications necessary. If the Church had any hope for unity, it would have to be clear and evident that God was reaching out to the Gentile world in the same way that He was reaching out to Israel. And, toward that end, we can see a dramatic statement being made to the Jewish believers. It was, “Yes, even a *Roman centurion* can be saved. Even he can have the forgiveness of sins and the exact same filling of the Spirit that you received.” That’s a big statement. One that will be hard for some of the Church members to accept in Jerusalem.

**Acts 10:4a - <sup>4</sup> Looking intently at him, he became afraid and said, “What is it, lord?”**

I’d say this serves as another marker or measuring tool for us when people make claims about seeing angels or going to heaven. In the presence of that kind of power, even this battle hardened, special forces warrior was terrified. To his credit, he didn’t turn and run - he was a courageous man - but faced the angel and waited for instruction.

**Acts 10:4b - The angel told him, “Your prayers and your acts of charity have come up as a memorial offering before God.**

What an amazing thing to be told! Try to imagine what has just been said? There on the altar of heaven, as incense rises, pleasing the Lord, a wisp is somehow identified as belonging to Cornelius. “There is his prayer. There is his act of compassion to a Jew in the town. There is his kindness and generosity.” Those things, accomplished on earth, are seen as a memorial offering in heaven.

We live in the dispensation of grace, but that doesn’t mean we’re done with offerings. We no longer have to make sacrifices for atonement, but we are now free and commanded to make daily, ongoing offerings to our Lord that we might honor God and please Him and glorify Him through our lives.

Here are some New Testament references for us:

**Hebrews 13:15 - ...let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name.**

**2 Corinthians 8:19 - [Titus] was appointed by the churches to accompany us as we take the offering to Jerusalem—a service that glorifies the Lord...**

**Philippians 2:17 - I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God.**

**Philippians 4:18 - I am generously supplied with the gifts you sent me with Epaphroditus. They are a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God.**

**Romans 12:1 - Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship.**

We are to be people who continually put offerings on the altar of heaven through our devotion on earth. Cornelius was told that these things were *memorial* offerings. The memorial offering, detailed in the Levitical law, was always a *representative* portion. It was given in acknowledgement that *all* the

crop belonged to God. So, when we see these ideas brought together with the imperatives in the New Testament we find that *all* our praise, *all* our words, *all* our money, *all* our service, *all* our lives belong to God and we can regularly, joyfully give portion after portion to the Lord that He might be pleased and glorified.

The angel continued:

**Acts 10:5 - <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa and call for Simon, who is also named Peter.**

I think we can sense God's grace here. He didn't demand that Cornelius go AWOL. Rather, the Lord instructed him to send others to go and fetch a messenger who would come and tell them what they needed to do. You see, God didn't only want to save the impressive head of the house, He wanted to save them all, down to the lowliest house servant.

**Acts 10:6 - <sup>6</sup> He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea."**

This encounter ends with clear direction. He's given all the information he needs to find who he's looking for. There was no GPS. No addresses. No Find My Friends. But, you know, God can get a *lot* done even without modern conveniences. That's a silly thing to say, but, again, sometimes we slip into a mentality that we have to have certain things in order to accomplish ministry. A common pattern I see these days is that when a new church plant is being established, they say, "We need \$250,000 to get started." Even this week I was on a church's website, it's a fine church, I'm not against them, but they've got a fundraising campaign going. They want 100% of their people to pledge toward a 3 year, \$3.5million goal. Here's what they say on the site: "Build to Reach is a three-year campaign to raise funds to build a dedicated sanctuary for the church that will seat many more people and allow [us] to reach more souls for the gospel of Jesus Christ."

I know what they mean and I'm sure they mean well. But, you don't actually *have* to spend \$3.5million before you reach more souls for Jesus Christ. God can get it done in the first century without programs or gimmicks or PayPal. Look what God was able to do through a few, barely literate fishermen!

**Acts 10:7-8 - <sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had gone, he called two of his household slaves and a devout soldier, who was one of those who attended him. <sup>8</sup> After explaining everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.**

Cornelius was quick to obey. That's a very important part of devotion that pleases God. Though it was late in the day, with little sunlight left, he sent his servants on the long, 35 mile trip to Joppa. But, being a man of care and concern, he made sure to send them with protection. He couldn't go himself, but he fully outfitted them to get where they needed to go. And he was willing to sacrifice his own comfort for the sake of the Lord. He sent his personal attendant to help some slaves rather than keep him back at the house. And, we see Cornelius was an open man. He explained everything. He didn't lord over these guys, even though it was his station to do so. He didn't behave as if he was some special, mystical, religious person. He was humble and helpful.

His devotion is an inspiration. And he doesn't even have the Holy Spirit yet! Just imagine what he would've been like after verse 46! We don't have to just imagine it, we can *live* it out. We're the Gentiles on the field now. We're the ones to whom Cornelius has handed the baton.

J.J. Watt, who talked about studying Reggie White's play style, admits that he's been unable to copy one of his signature moves. Of course, that's ok. Because Watt isn't White. He's not supposed to copy. He became a great player in his own right while learning from guys before him.

We're not to copy either. We don't please God by trying to copy Cornelius. That's not going to work. But we can learn from him about the motion of devotion. About living out our faith in a way that is pleasing to the Lord as we seek Him and obey Him and offer portion after portion onto the altar of heaven. A portion of praise. A portion of prayer. A portion of service. A portion of charity. Of generosity.

Reggie White once said this: *"I've always believed since I was a kid that God was gonna allow me to play professional football, to use it as a platform to proclaim and live out the name of Jesus. And, you know, that's the most exciting part about my life because God has done things in me to change my character to benefit the kingdom."* In a sense, he was a modern day Cornelius. We can be too as we live life to proclaim Jesus.