

CORNELIUS . . . who received a strange warning
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(ACTS 10: 22)

Cornelius was the most revered elder of his church, and chairman of most of its committees. Each Sabbath he bowed in the sacred house, and each weekday he lived a life worthy of his noblest generosity; a target for every needy society. A man of integrity, he adorned his town, was an important member of the council, and a very desirable friend. A person of bearing, breeding, culture, he was known and regarded by the highest officials in the nation, and his name was often mentioned in the society columns of the newspapers. He was certain of election to parliament, but—reader, let me apologize. My mistake is inexcusable, my tenses have been confused. I should have said that Cornelius would have become such a man if he had belonged to a later generation.

He was Good—but He was not Saved

There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always " (Acts 10: 1, 2). Cornelius was the kind of man who regularly studied the Scriptures, and daily presided at morning and evening family prayers. His sincerity was indisputable, and his influence extended throughout the town. He had few equals: yet in the sight of God he was unsaved. He was certainly good according to moral standards, but he was not a Christian. When his servants interviewed Simon Peter, they affirmed that their master had been warned by God to send for help. And when, later, Peter explained his conduct to the apostles, he stated that God had declared, "Peter shall tell thee words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved " (I I : 14). Obviously, then, good works plus a sincere religious belief are not sufficient to guarantee a man's salvation.

He was Wise—so He did not argue

There are many people in this world who are the exact replica of Cornelius, except for one important detail. Whereas the man of old listened quietly to the suggestions of God's Spirit, his modern counterparts love to argue. Humility is the child of sincerity, and Cornelius was never seen to better advantage than when he bowed before God and His servant to hear the way of salvation. The fact that God warned this great man was truly suggestive. This was not advice; it was not merely instruction. Warning implies danger. The love of God embraced the entire world, but a man whose integrity equalled that of Cornelius attracted great attention. His very attitude demanded that God should bring to him the light of additional knowledge.

He was Anxious—so He did not Procrastinate

"And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually; and when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa" (10:7, 8). If a warning revealed danger, then danger demanded action. This was a matter of paramount importance needing urgent attention. Other people might have decided to give the affair prolonged consideration; some might have shrugged their shoulders, dismissing this as an empty vision. Some might have even shared their thoughts with fellow men, and as a result would have been talked out

CORNELIUS . . . who received a strange warning of their intentions. Cornelius was a wise man. His sincere endeavors had failed to produce satisfaction. His piety had only increased his desire for improvement, and as soon as the voice of God reached his ears, he immediately took steps to obey the new commandments. His glorious example might well serve as our guiding star. Tomorrow is the most uncertain thing in the calendar.

He Believed-and He was not Ashamed

" The path of the just is as a shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day " (Prov. 4:18). When God revealed His acceptance of this Gentile soldier and his company, Peter marvelled and said, " Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized . . . And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then he prayed they him to tarry certain days " (Acts 10: 47, 48). Cornelius was an officer in the Italian army of occupation. His baptism would invite attention in many places, and since Christianity was considered to be an enemy of the State, serious repercussions could follow. Cornelius smiled and went ahead with his plans. He had found a new life, and was not ashamed.

The Bishop's Sermon

Years ago, during city-wide services in Glasgow, Scotland, I stayed with six other ministers in a central hotel, and among our number was the Rev. Chalmers Lyons, a forthright preacher of the Gospel. I shall always remember a story he told of his travels in Germany. Accompanied by Bishop Taylor Smith, he was going from place to place; and one Saturday evening the Bishop looked at his friend and said. Lyons, I'll give you a sermon for tomorrow."

" Yes, Bishop; what is the text? "

" Lord, by this time he stinketh."

" But, Bishop, I can hardly speak from that text."

"Why not? I used it in an English cathedral only a few months ago. I had a great time with it."

Chalmers Lyons stared at the Bishop; it seemed inconceivable that such a text could provide subject matter for an address in a dignified cathedral. Then, as he recognized that the Bishop was not leg-pulling, he continued, " Bishop, you preached from that text: what did you say about it?"

"Well, I had three points: (i) A dead body cannot save itself; (ii) A dead body only deteriorates-it gets worse and worse; (iii) Christ alone can do anything in the matter."

Chalmers Lyons paused, and his eyes were twinkling. You must admit," - he added, " the old Bishop had some excellent thoughts there, and I told him so." Then he continued, " But the Bishop had not completed his story. He went on to say, ' Lyons, after the service had ended, I went to the vestry to disrobe, and was surprised when the Dean of the cathedral followed me in and locked the door.' ' Bishop,' said the Dean, 'your text upset me greatly.' ' Well,' responded the Bishop, ' it was true, was it not?' 'Yes, that is what I mean. You stressed the fact that men dead in sins cannot save themselves; they grow worse and worse. You said that even the finest body ultimately dies; that the coming of Christ in resurrection power is essential. All men need to be born again. Bishop, it is true, but I never knew it until tonight. I need that new life.' "

And there, behind a locked door, they knelt to pray, and that scholarly man entered into newness of life. The Bishop concluded his story by saying, " I heard from him a little

CORNELIUS . . . who received a strange warning while ago. He is rejoicing, but some of his colleagues cannot understand what has happened to him. He is so different, So there you are, Lyons; the text is an excellent one. Use it tomorrow." And smiling broadly, the Bishop went his way.

Paul and His Faulty Grammar

Sometimes when I preach the Gospel, I refer to Paul's text, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephes. 3: 8). This utterance always takes me back in thought to the High School in Wales where, years ago, I had a most formidable English mistress. With untiring persistence she instilled into the minds of her scholars the principles of English grammar, and it was no cause for amazement when she became increasingly unpopular. I have often said that I would love to listen to a debate between my old teacher and the apostle Paul. Undoubtedly she would reprove him for the loose way in which he handled superlatives; perhaps he would retaliate by telling her she had much to learn! "Unto me, who am less than the least . . . " It is not possible to be less than the least. No man can be lower than the lowest, for if he be lower than the lowest, then the lowest is not the lowest-he is the lowest!

At least, that is what my old teacher would have said. This text is the last of three which I like to quote. Here is progression of thought. At the beginning of his ministry Paul declared, "Paul, an apostle by the will of God." When he was much older he added, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints . . ." Finally, in writing to Timothy, he reached a glorious climax when he said, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. I : 15). Paul's wisdom increased with his age. (i) An apostle; (ii) The lowest saint; (iii) The greatest sinner. The closer one gets to the light, the more easily one sees the dirt. Cornelius, Paul, Nicodemus, and a host of others would corroborate this statement. We are not saved by works, lest any man should boast. Eternal life is the gift of God: but it is only given to those who know their need; to those who come humbly, seeking from God's hand that which could never be received in any other way.

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