

A Gospel for Everyone **Acts 10:34-43**

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Steve DeWitt

I'd like to begin by relating a story. I tell it with some personal shame and as an example of God working in my life and changing me. I came here in 1997. Yes, in the previous millennium. I knew basically nothing of Northwest Indiana. I am a born and bred Midwesterner, but this community was new to me. I came here to pastor this church which had been around since the 1930s. It started in Gary and moved to Merrillville in 1969. Shortly after I came, I was teaching a Bible study and a few people in that study made some blatantly racist remarks. I was so new that I didn't want to step on toes, but it was one of those gut check moments. I decided I couldn't let it stand and very strongly admonished their sinful attitude. I may have even been a little self-righteous in doing so.

But this is part of my story. I grew up playing basketball, which is a multiracial experience. I never liked racism and didn't really laugh along. But I've been on a journey learning that there is a difference between not being a racist and loving all people.

So I moved here and began ministering in a community with historically racial tensions. For example, there is a big difference between north and south Lake County. When I came to Bethel, we were just in south Lake County and my life was largely lived there. While I condemned racism, I can't say that I felt extraordinarily burdened by the tremendous needs in north Lake County. I did find myself bristle a little when people would associate me or where I live with the social issues in north Lake County. I was trying to reach my Jerusalem—at least south Jerusalem. Again, it's one thing not to be a racist; it's another thing to love people different from you.

This is a work God has been doing in my life and I think in the life of our church. This led us to not just be a neighbor but to call Gary our home with the purchase this past year of the Boys and Girls club in downtown Gary. We will soon start a campus of our church there with worship services and community ministries. This is a big step for our church.

A few months ago I was speaking at a seminary chapel in another part of the country. The man introducing me said, "Steve pastors Bethel Church in Northwest Indiana. Is that near Gary?" Then he added, "Of course, nobody wants to say they are from Gary." I bristled, but now I bristled for another reason. *You're talking badly about where my church is.* I got up and I said, "Actually, our church has just purchased a facility in Gary and that is now our home." I bristled, but I bristled for entirely different reasons—better ones; nobler ones. I am a work in progress.

Why is this good? Is the gospel only for people like me? Is God a respecter of persons? Does God care more for south Lake County or north Lake County? Does he see us as rich or poor, Latino or White or African American? Is the gospel for everyone or not? Does God love all categories of people or not? Where we are going today is identifying who God loves and what this has to do with the resurrection.

Our text is Acts 10 and here we are introduced to someone that God loves and saves but he's completely the wrong type of person. *"At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God."* (Acts 10:1-2)

Who was Cornelius?

His position and authority

First, he is a centurion in the Roman army. A centurion was a commander of 100 soldiers. This was a key position in the Roman army. To rise to this level was no small feat. Cornelius was a leader of men; a leader of soldiers in one of the most disciplined and accomplished armies in history. Cornelius was a dude by any measure.

His success and luxury

If you work for a company and the boss calls you in and says, "We're giving you a new district—western Siberia; make us proud," you'd walk out of the meeting and think, *They don't like me*. If, on the other hand, you go into the meeting and they say, "We're moving you to corporate headquarters in San Diego," you'd think something different wouldn't you?

Cornelius is a Roman centurion in *Caesarea*. This was the assignment everybody wanted. Caesarea was the port city on the Mediterranean (see map below). It was and is to this day, the San Diego or Hawaii of Israel.



Can you read what's on the golf ball below?



It says, *Caesarea Golf Club*. It's the only golf course in Israel. I played one hole there just to say I played golf in Israel. Unfortunately, I bogeyed it.

Are you getting the picture? Cornelius was a leader of men. A man of authority. A man of accomplishment.

His religion and devotion

Of all the things noted about Cornelius, the practice of his religion stands out. He was a devout man who feared God and did good works. He gave generously to the poor, and prayed continually to God. As an indication of just how devout this guy was, in Acts 10:22 a few guys who know him describe him as a man *"well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation."* If you are a Gentile and a soldier of the occupying army and yet all the Jews admire you, you must be one special person.

His ethnicity: gentile!

In terms of redemptive history, this is what is most significant. So far the gospel has only gone to Jews and those of Jewish descent (Samaritans). No one without Jewish descent has become a Christian and it's not on anyone's radar that God might want to save the Gentiles too. Into the story steps Cornelius. He wasn't Jewish; he was Italian. To this point the prevailing opinion was, *God doesn't love the Italians! First of all, he only loves us. Secondly, if he's going to love someone, I hope it's not the Italians. I mean they already have enough of heaven with their pizza, pasta, and Ferraris.* The Jews hated the Romans. They were the invading army. They were the ones killing them with taxes and sometimes swords. *God can't love the Italians and he certainly doesn't love Roman soldiers who occupy the land promised to us through Abraham.*

So Cornelius was completely the wrong kind of man for God to love, much less save. Let me summarize what happened. God gave the Apostle Peter a vision that helped Peter consider that maybe God loves more people than the Jews. Long story short: by God's direction Cornelius summons Peter to come to Caesarea. Peter comes and enters Cornelius' house. There he finds a house filled with people who are prepared to hear his message. Peter is bewildered but realizes that God is not a racist or simply a non-racist, but a lover of all people. So he tells them about Jesus.

What Was Peter's Message?

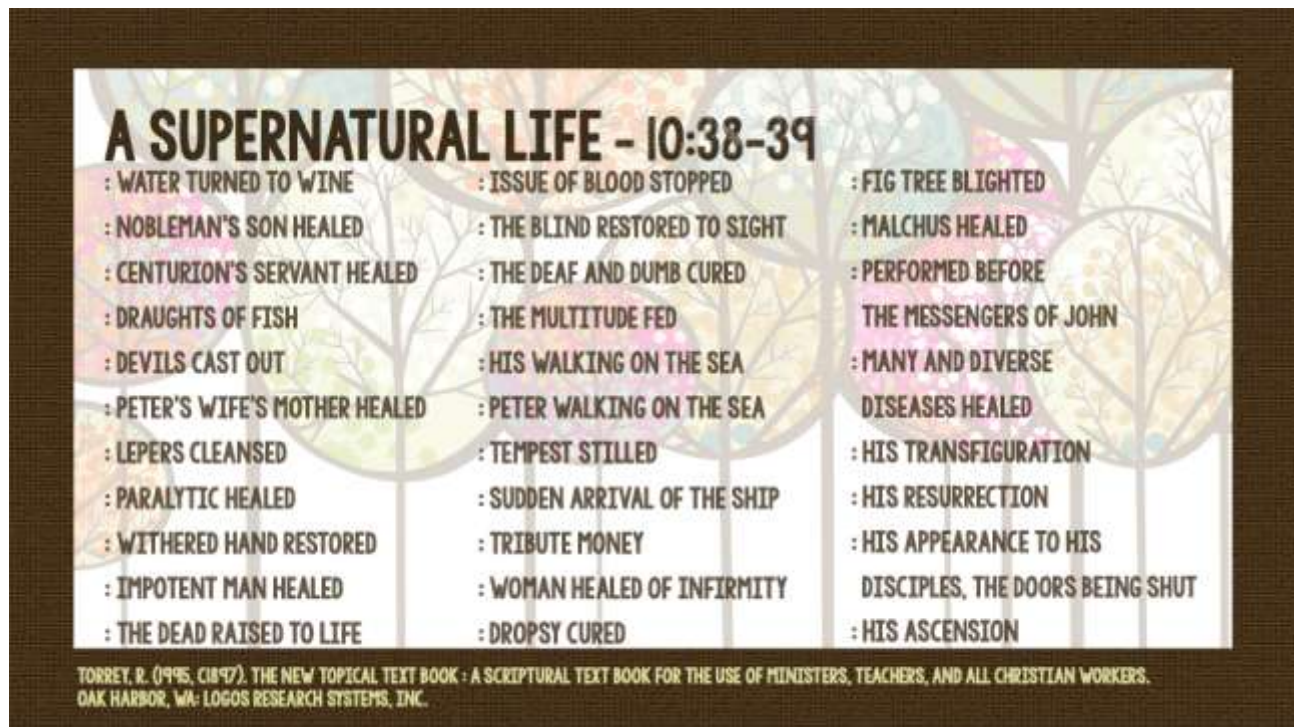
A supernatural life (Acts 10:34-39)

"So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem." (Acts 10:34-39)

Here is a summary of Jesus' public ministry. His baptism by John the Baptist. His anointing for ministry by the Holy Spirit. His ministry in upper Israel, in Galilee, Nazareth, Cana, Capernaum and surrounding regions. A ministry summarized by "doing good" and doing miracles. The most amazing life of good ever lived and a supernatural ministry of miracles unlike anyone else in history. You may say, was he that good or miraculous?

Below is a list of Jesus' miracles (on the next page). It includes famous acts of kindness like touching and healing the leper, raising the son of the widow to life, feeding the multitudes, and

healing many diseases. Cornelius had heard about this as everyone in Israel was talking about Jesus.



A crucified death (Acts 10:39)

"They put him to death by hanging him on a tree." (Acts 10:39)

They all knew what that phrase meant. *Hanging on a tree* was a euphemism for death by crucifixion. Remember, they are in a Roman soldier's house. It's like mentioning boot camp in a Navy Seal's house. They know all about it. The Romans were infamous for using crucifixion to intimidate people into submission. Not only had Cornelius seen crucifixions, he may have crucified people himself and watched them die.

Why was this a powerful psychological weapon? It was such a gruesome and horrifying way to die. You didn't die on a cross from the nails in your hands and feet or even the cross itself. It was an excruciatingly slow death from exposure and asphyxiation. Slowly the muscles would lose their strength to raise the diaphragm enough to get a breath. Gravity was the killer as the victim writhed and gave every ounce of remaining energy to simply take a breath. The strong would last longer; sometimes even a day or two. To speed up the death the Romans would break the legs of the victims so they could no longer push up to breathe. They simply asphyxiated and died quickly.

"...by hanging him on a tree. Who's "him"? Jesus. They crucified Jesus on a cross. You may know the back story of political corruption and treachery by the religious leaders. In short, Jesus was a threat to them. So in conspiring with Jesus' disciple Judas, they arrested Jesus secretly. They didn't have authority to kill him; only the Romans did. So they applied extreme political pressure and threatened Pilate. Pilate the politician caved and approved Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus was beaten, flogged, and taken to a hill called Golgotha where they crucified him. He died on that cross on the day we call Good Friday. But that was not the end of the story.

A resurrected life (Acts 10:40-41)

"...but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10:40-41)

This brings us to the central message of Christianity and the reason we celebrate Easter. Jesus' death was redemptive. He wasn't just dying but also bearing and paying. God the Father applied to Jesus the guilt of our sins. He died as a substitute for us. His death was for our sin. His resurrection conquered death. At our Good Friday services we had some open mic testimony time and a young boy took the mic and said, "Yeah, Jesus on the cross, he like, smashed death." That's good theology. Death's absolute claim on us was smashed. How? His resurrection is called in 1 Corinthians 15 a first fruit. It's like the first budding flower on these trees now—if this bud can live, all these others can too. This gives us tremendous hope for eternal life and resurrection.

Two dear saints in our church who have died this past year are examples of this hope. Grace Han died a few weeks ago. She has an incredible life story but when she was dying from cancer she would regularly say, "I can't wait for my promotion." She wasn't dying; she was being promoted. Jim Watt was a dedicated Christian, and in his elderly years, near the end, he knew he was dying. His family told me he would sleep for long periods of time, then wake up, look around, and say with great disappointment, "I'm still here?" How could they approach death so hopefully? *"...but God raised him on the third day."*

A gospel for everyone (Acts 10:42-43)

"And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:42-43)

The rest of the story is how Cornelius and the others there believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. Nobody had realized this salvation wasn't just for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. Cornelius believed and became a follower of Jesus that day.

What Does This Mean?

If Cornelius COULD be saved, so can you

Peter had God's love in a racial box. *You had to be Jewish to be saved.* I don't think Peter thought God was a racist, but there is a big difference between being a non-racist and loving everyone. Think of God's love. Certainly God loves us, right? Even people like me? God's on our side. God prefers us. Then God rocks Peter's world by saving an Italian, Roman, Gentile Soldier. In this he says, I love Italians too. I love Romans too. I love those you might regard as your enemies too. I want to save them too. God doesn't have boxes.

Think of all the questions God WON'T ask at the final judgment: *Where are you from? Where did you go to school? What side of town did you live on? What's your skin color? What is your ethnicity? What did you do for a living? Did you make much money? Were you well known? Were you influential? Did people admire you?*

Those things don't matter to God. There are no cultural, racial, economic, or social restrictions to God's love or salvation. He's not a respecter of persons. My mentor's dad was a pastor in Indianapolis many years ago. He told me the story that one Sunday, possibly on Easter, before the service an usher came rushing up to him and said, "Pastor, the Governor of Indiana is here

and the church is full. What should we do?" His response was classic. He said, "Tell him to find a seat like everyone else."

In God's eyes, there are no governors, no celebrities, no special people. There are just sinners and the only celebrity in the church is Jesus. So if God chooses to save a Gentile member of the invading army of the land he promised to Abraham, then God can and will save you the same way he did Cornelius, "*Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" (Acts 10:43)

If Cornelius NEEDED to be saved, so do we

You may say, but wait, he was a religious and good man; he was a good candidate to be saved. Actually, it's very hard for Cornelius types to be saved. They are good people after all. They are better than most. They are moral. Kind. They are show-up-for-Easter-service type people. Is it possible to be a Cornelius and not be saved? What does this tell us if not that Cornelius type people still need the gospel? We are not saved by works but by Jesus and faith in him.

I'm such a good person, I don't need Jesus. Are you a better person than Cornelius? Do your enemies admire your goodness? Are you known throughout the country for your piety and spirituality? Cornelius doesn't stop Peter and say, "Well, do you realize who I am?" You may be a good person, but you're not better than Cornelius.

Yet Cornelius realized that as good as he was, he wasn't good enough. Cornelius needed a Savior. When it gets to the bottom line about Easter, isn't that really it? Peter explains the action step: "*Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*" (Acts 10:43) This is the gospel for everyone and a salvation for all who will believe.

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