

## Acts 10:34

### I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism

On Christmas Day 1642, a little boy, was born near Woolsthorpe, Lincolnshire

- His father had died before he was born and his mother was very poor
- She named the little boy 'Isaac'
- And although she was frightened that he would not survive the harsh winter
- He grew up to a healthy boy working on the farm
- In his spare time he enjoyed making working models of clocks, wagons and windmills
- When he was 15 years old a great storm swept across England
- He was fascinated by its great power, the thunder and lightning
- He studied all he could and managed to get a place at Cambridge University
- Studying theology and mathematics, paying for his board and lodging by doing chores
- But while he was there, the Black Death (bubonic plague) struck
- And the university was temporarily closed for two terms
- students going to the country, where it was hoped they would be safe
- Isaac went back to his mother's farm and had time to think deeply about science
- One fine day he took a study table to work in the orchard
- One thing he could not understand was why a ball rolls on a flat surface rolls straight
- But the moon does not travel in a straight line but circles the earth
- Isaac remembered the force of the wind in the storm and that worked his windmill
- Perhaps there was some hidden force that influenced the course of the moon
- One day, an apple fell from the tree above and landed on Isaac's worktable
- Could it be, he thought, that the apple and the moon were both subject to a force
- And so he set about proving that the same force operated on the apple and the moon
- Sir Isaac Newton became one of the greatest scientists of all time
- And is the person who is accredited with the discovery of 'the law of gravity'
- The simple but important lesson is that great things exist that we cannot see
- One such thing is the grace of God – we cannot see it but it is still there
- As we shall discover from Acts 10

In Acts 10 Peter is already staying at the home of Simon the tanner

- A tanner's work involved removing surplus flesh from the hides of dead animals
- The hides would be cured in salt water, which explains why the house was by the sea
- Because of his work with dead animals Jews would regard a tanner's house as unclean
- But the really important question here is the relationship between church and Judaism
- In short, did a believer have to be a Jew in order to be a good Christian
- This might seem a rather unimportant point today but it is not unimportant
- Firstly, it touches the question of relationship between the Old and New Testaments
- And secondly, because there is apparently a growing number of people
- To whom this question is important, not least the New Covenant Church of God
- Which teaches Sabbath observance and kosher food laws as being for everyone

The commission of Jesus in Acts 1:8 said that the apostles were to be witnesses

- In Jerusalem and Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth
- The gospel work has begun in Jerusalem and Judea and extended to Samaria
- The Ethiopian official was an example of the word going to a Gentile individual

After the account of the conversion of Saul, great apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15)

- Is now followed by an account of the gospel going to the Gentiles
- It is almost impossible for us to comprehend what a great step that was
- Critically, would a believer be accepted without any relationship to Judaism

Peter, the one to whom the keys of the kingdom were given is chosen to open another door

- This time it is to introduce the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles
- And so Peter shares in the very thing that Jonah resisted in Joppa (Jonah 1:3)
- For it is while he is staying here that Cornelius has a vision at Caesarea

Named in honour of Augustus Caesar, Caesarea was 65 northwest of Jerusalem

- Naturally, it had been a second-class harbour because of its shallow entrance
- But Herod the Great changed all that and made it into a magnificent seaport
- By deepening the harbour and building a breakwater against the southern gales
- It had a great amphitheatre, a pagan temple, and a fresh water aqueduct
- In New Testament times it was the capital of the Roman province of Judea

In Caesarea, Cornelius, a centurion had a vision telling him to send to Joppa for Peter

- Centurions are often well thought of in the Bible of heaven” (Matt. 8:11; 27:54)
- They were non-commissioned officers who had worked their way through the ranks
- Roughly equivalent to today’s army captain they commanded a cohort
- A cohort was one-tenth of a Roman Legion, officially 600 men
- Cornelius is described as ‘devout and God-fearing’ (a ‘religious man’)
- A Gentile who having rejected the polytheism of paganism
- Sought to worship one true God, pray and lead a moral life
- In short, we could call him a spiritually minded Gentile

Although three in the afternoon was a Jewish time for prayer

- The mention of the time is probably only to show that it was still daylight
- Whenever angels appear the reaction of those who see them is fear
- And it is no different with Cornelius, despite his being a hardened Roman soldier
- Nevertheless he is offered reassuring words that his prayers and alms come to God
- And is commanded to send men to Joppa for Peter

A special revelation would be necessary to send Peter to the Gentiles

- As Cornelius’s men were approaching the city, Peter went on the roof to pray
- This seems an unusual thing to do – especially at noon
- However, at noon it would be hot and possibly busy in the house
- the roof would give a quiet place to pray, some shade under an awning and a breeze
- while in prayer, Peter became somewhat hungry, and he also saw a vision
- the word ‘trance’ translated the Greek word ‘ekstasis’
- because ‘trance’ has negative associations with occultism, ‘ecstasy’ is probably better
- during this ‘ecstasy’ Peter saw a vision: animals, an unholy mixture of clean/unclean
- according to the Law: clean animals chewed the cud and had four cloven hooves
- Peter is commanded to ‘kill and eat’
- but in his vision, some of the animals on the new lunch menu
- were not kosher (suitable for Jews to eat) but unclean

His response ‘surely not, Lord ... I have never eaten anything impure or unclean’ (10:14)

- sounds pretty much like the Peter we have known from the gospels
- (‘never Lord this shall never happen to you’ Matthew 16:22)
- the categorical refusal to obey one whom he calls Lord rather contradictory
- to those of us who think little about kosher food laws this seems unimportant
- but for the Jews dietary laws are not merely peculiar culinary habits
- they are a matter of survival and identity for this marks them out from the nations
- but now things are changing and Peter must learn that this can now be left behind
- for the animals are a parable of men and women – the gospel is for Gentiles too
- Peter is being prepared to accept Cornelius’ invitation to visit him
- While Peter was still on the roof the deputation from Cornelius arrived
- And Peter is commanded not to hesitate to go with them for God has sent them

Jewish law prohibited a Gentile from associating with Gentiles

- Such contacts made a Jew ceremonially unclean
- Entering Gentiles’ buildings or touching their possessions also made them unclean
- It was forbidden to accept the hospitality of Gentiles and to eat with them
- Despite all of that Peter invited the men into his house to be his guests (Acts 10:23)
- The theme of hospitality is an important one
- Jesus was criticised by the Pharisees for welcoming sinners and eating with them
- A criticism that prompted Jesus to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)
- Yet some Christians have made it a false virtue not to have unbelieving friends
- And certainly not to show them any hospitality
- One of my members told me years ago that she never had anyone visit her home
- This was such a shame because she had a nice home and was a good cook
- But even if you have an ordinary home – with the help of your supermarket
- You can soon make it a place of welcome – where the gospel can be shared

It was easier of a Jew to have Gentiles stay with him than to go with them

- Nevertheless Peter’s first step of openness, kindness and hospitality
- Is followed by another great step forward – visiting the centurion
- This is such an important development in the spread of the gospel
- Luke repeats the details of the visions (Acts 11:1-18)
- Showing the importance he attached to this story, giving a total of 66 verses
- When Peter arrived at the house, Cornelius fell at his feet in reverence
- I think there are some quick observations that we can make on that
- Cornelius, the centurion, was humble
- Peter will not risk anything being offered to him that might only be offered to God
- Both men realised that reverence and the highest respect should be offered to God

Nevertheless, their meeting is the climax of a decisive passage

- Cornelius is prepared in a vision to receive Peter and the gospel message
- Peter is prepared in a vision to go to Cornelius and proclaim the gospel message
- It would have been wrong for Peter to accept honour from Cornelius as divine
- It would have been inappropriate for Peter to reject any man as unclean
- We must beware of the two traps – Jesus is the only man worthy of honour as God
- No one is outside the call of the gospel

## I GOD'S GRACE: PREVENIENT

Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realise that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.'

(Acts 10:35-36)

Peter began to speak looks like a fairly ordinary phrase

- Literally it means, 'opening his mouth, Peter said' preparing for something significant
- It is a weighty utterance indeed for centuries of animosity are swept away
- God in his sovereignty is bringing Gentiles into a relationship with him through Jesus
- We see God working here in 'saving grace' but what has God been doing until then
- The answer is that he has been working by 'prevenient grace'

Prevenient grace is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives before we accept Jesus as Saviour

- The answer is that he has been working by 'prevenient grace'
- It is the Holy Spirit who shows us that we are sinners
- It is the Holy Spirit who shows us our need of a Saviour
- It is the Holy Spirit who prepares us to know the blessings of God
- It is the Holy Spirit who works to bring us to Christ (Jeremiah 31:3)
- The Spirit of God's grace precedes the gospel everywhere in the world

Cornelius was 'devout and God-fearing' (Acts 10:2)

- He gave alms and prayed but he did not know saving grace
- What he knew was 'prevenient grace'
- God's grace was working in Cornelius' life long before Peter arrived at his house
- This is something of great importance and a great encouragement to us
- When we feel that we are being prompted by the Spirit to share Jesus with others
- We are not going into the situation 'cold' – the Spirit has already been at work
- The circumstances of Cornelius are not isolated – there are other examples
- The Spirit prepared Lydia to hear the gospel and opened her heart (Acts 16:14)
- If it were not for the prevenient grace of God we could not become his children
- Salvation begins with the grace of God
- When we first knew we had sinned – it was the grace of God
- When we first listened to the gospel – it was the grace of God
- Naturally, we would have chosen to be as far away from all of this as possible
- But prevenient grace brought us to the sound of the gospel
- Salvation is carried on by convincing grace
- A greater understanding of ourselves and a greater understanding of Jesus
- 'through grace we have been saved through faith ... the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8)
- this is why Methodists baptise infants, as a sign of the grace of God to a child
- the Israelites had the covenant sign of circumcision – grace before faith
- Christian households had the covenant sign of baptism – grace before faith
- I have sympathy with those who say that immersion is more dramatic symbolism
- But the most dramatic thing is that the grace of God reaches us though undeserving

## II GOD'S GRACE: PROCLAIMED

Peter says that God does not show favouritism

- He accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right
- The promise that God made to Abraham was that through his seed (Gen. 12:3)
- All nations of the earth would be blessed – Jesus is that 'seed'
- And Jesus is 'Lord of all', that is Lord over both Jews and Gentiles
- Stephen had showed that after the sacrifice of Jesus, the temple was no longer needed
- Likewise the purity laws that were once needed to mark Israel out as God's people
- Were no longer needed and Gentiles did not need to conform to them

As Paul later wrote to the Ephesians (2:12-16):

Remember that ... you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship of Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

In the Kingdom of God there is no categorisation dependent on our background

- Peter went to a top official of the occupying army in the hated capital of Judea
- If Christians cannot show that we are different to people who are 'our enemies'
- What hope is there for the rest of the world?
- We must be prepared to extend the good news of Jesus to all
- The grace of God is already there – but our charge is to proclaim it

The word of God came clearly to Cornelius and to Peter through prayer

- We should not forget the importance of prayer in the life of the church and believer
- But when we are seeking God's will our first port of call is the scriptures
- 'read your Bible pray every day if you want to grow'

Peter's sermon Cornelius's house is a summary of the essential apostolic message

- the fourth great sermon in Acts, similar to his two other sermons (third: Stephen)
- at Pentecost and at Solomon's colonnade after the healing of the lame man
- as Peter is preaching to Gentiles – more information about Jesus' earthly ministry
- information that will later take shape in the gospel of Mark
- Jesus was the promised Messiah to Israel and also Lord of all (v. 36)
- The death of Jesus was part of God's plan – on a wooden cross (v. 39)
- God raised him from death as prophesied (v. 40) – literal, physical, attested
- Resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved ('eating and drinking' not a ghost)
- Glorified now and for ever (appointed as judge of the living and the dead, v. 42)
- All must repent and believe (v. 43)

When Peter said God “accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right”

- He does not mean that such people are saved because of this attitude
- but they are ready to receive forgiveness of sins if they respond by believing in Jesus
- this same Jesus has been appointed of judge of the living and the dead
- he is not loving and forgiving but he is not weak
- we need not doubt that Peter was a great preacher
- neither should we doubt that the congregation was attentive
- still the big question in everyone’s mind was ‘does God accept Gentiles’
- this is partly answered by God’s grace: prevenient
- and further answered by God’s grace: proclaimed – but it is confirmed by

### III GOD’S GRACE: POURED OUT

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

(Acts 10:44-47)

The question in their hearts was answered decisively by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit

- Peter proclaimed that *everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins
- But did that literally mean ‘everyone’, Gentiles as well as Jews
- God providentially attested his grace by pouring out his Spirit upon Gentiles
- This grace was not a second blessing but an outpouring on those who believed
- There was no favouritism – Gentiles has received the same Spirit
- The sacrifice to which temple ritual had pointed was fulfilled perfectly in Jesus
- The separation of an elect people from which the Saviour had come was complete
- A further crucial step had been made in the progress of the church
- Fulfilling the great commission to disciple all nations
- For in the last days (from Pentecost onwards)
- The Spirit of God is poured out on all God’s servants

When we as believers are prompted to share Jesus with others

- God’s grace: prevenient – has already been preparing them for the good news
- When we are called upon to witness or to preach the good news
- God grace: proclaimed – is made alive by the power of the Spirit
- When people trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour
- God’s grace: poured out – is a blessing for us all