

**“What it means to be Reformed”; Session # 35 – Sola Gratia – “Common Grace to Saving Grace”, Prepared for the Adult Sunday School class on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.**

**Read Acts 10: 1-8** - “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.”

Here we see that this man Cornelius was a centurion; but God not being a respecter of persons, according to what He had purposed in Jesus Christ, the ethnic and national distinctions no longer were a barrier to the gospel being presented to all men. Christ His Son had broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile through the blood of his cross. (Ephesians 2: 14-18) It meant that God would indeed have respect to Cornelius’ offerings of alms and prayer, even though he was not of the Old Testament chosen national race of Israel. And so, God could, according to His sovereign purpose in election, and according to His everlasting love, give him the gift of eternal life. God had determined to have the gospel preached to him. God obviously was intending to save this Gentile man, this Roman centurion. He was deliberately singling him out to save him. Even though salvation is not by works, God did take notice of his being devout. Cornelius feared God himself, and he made efforts to promote the worship of the only true and living God to all of his household. He was acting wisely and lovingly toward men and he was reverencing and obeying God according to everything that had been revealed to him by the Jewish people around him who did have the true knowledge of God. This was common grace which had been given to him.

Cornelius was also someone who gave generously to the poor and prayed to God always. So, God sent an angel to Cornelius, telling him that his prayers and alms had come for a memorial before God. This is very significant. God our God is a God who hears and remembers the prayers of all men that are sincerely offered to Him, the God of all the earth, the God of all flesh, the God of the nations. He sees the heart; He sees in secret, and in His common grace He works His will, giving many persons intellectual knowledge of Himself by means of the Scriptures. But this, in itself, is not enough to bring them to salvation unless, and until, it is accompanied by saving grace. This was the way that it was for this man Cornelius. His alms and his prayers were remembered as a memorial before God. They were not meritorious to his conversion, but they were rather something that God welcomed because they were done according to all the light that this man currently had, in relation to the truth of the Scriptures which he had gleaned thus far. He was seeking God with all of his heart, and we should remember the verse in Hebrews 12: 6 at this point: “But without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

Cornelius was seeking, but we must understand that something further was needed for this devout man to be saved. His good works and his prayers were acceptable to God. He himself was acceptable to God as someone whom God had, and He would, take special notice of, according to His sovereign will in election. And so, God sent the Apostle Peter to Cornelius. It says in verse 22 – “And they (Cornelius’ servants) 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.’” There was something that Cornelius still needed. He needed the words of the gospel, and he needed the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit in his heart in regeneration. He was going to receive both. He was going to receive special and saving grace as he heard the gospel.

When Peter came to visit Cornelius in Caesarea, Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends. After a few preliminary matters were dealt with concerning the fact that Cornelius should not worship the messenger, but rather the God who had sent him, it says this in verse 30 of Chapter 10:

**Acts Chapter 10: 30-48** - “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.”

**Now, let us ask this question: Was there any work of God the Father and the Holy Spirit going on in Cornelius’ life before this point?** There is no doubt that there was great common grace given to him, which had led him to be very religious, long before he was saved by hearing and believing the gospel, as it was preached to him by Peter. But the Father’s purpose was to save Cornelius and his household. A person can be very moral, and very religious, and yet unsaved. There are many people in the world today who are like this. So we

see, that it was absolutely necessary for the Father to draw Cornelius to Christ(John 6: 37) and it was necessary for the Spirit to so work that Cornelius would be shown that he could not save himself by means of his religious works, even though God was pleased with his works. God the Spirit was cleansing Cornelius by the washing of water with the Word.

**Look at Acts 10: 9-16.** “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.”

So, Cornelius being washed and cleansed he was no longer in the realm of common grace. He had definitely been moved by God Himself into the realm of special grace. But it took his hearing the gospel from Peter lips and his exercising his faith in the message of Christ which was preached to save him and to justify him.