

Acts 10:1-8 NIV

“Does God answer sinners’ prayers?”

“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, ‘Cornelius!’

“Cornelius stared at him in fear. ‘What is it, Lord?’ he asked. The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.’

“When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.”

Last week we left the Apostle Peter at the home of Simon, the Tanner, who lived in the ancient city of Joppa by the Mediterranean Sea.¹

¹ In the *Old Testament Book of Jonah*, Jonah lived northeast of Joppa, probably not far from Nazareth. When the Lord ordered him to go east and warn Nineveh to

We also left an important word undefined.

The way some churches define *saint* and folks use *saint* in everyday speech points to a broad misunderstanding of the word.

How should we understand the term *saint*?

Many would call Cornelius a saint.

Did you notice what a good guy he was?

- He held a rank equal to an army captain.
- He and his family were devout and God-fearing.
- He gave generously to the needy.
- Cornelius prayed regularly.
- God’s angel even appeared to him.

With those qualifications, he rose above ordinary folks, but was Cornelius a *saint*?

The Bible’s definition of *saint* strongly differs from current ideas of the term.

The Bible called living church folks *saints*.

These people were in various stages of maturity. E.g., Paul addressed “the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout” the region.²

The church in Corinth had lots of flawed *saints*.

repent, Jonah went to Joppa and booked passage on a ship bound for Spain, in the opposite direction. See map at the end of the sermon for locations of other places.

² 2 Corinthians 1:1 NIV Testifying about his earlier life, Paul told Governor Festus and King Agrippa: “On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them,” Acts 26:10 NIV.

Had the *saints* reached full maturity, Paul would have had no need to write them.

But why are God’s people known as *saints*?

The reason: saints are in a special relationship with Christ and set apart to serve him.

A Hebrew term³ in the OT emphasizes how certain things were set apart for service to God.

These included seasons, places, and items used in worship.

Once set aside for service to God (*made holy*), they were no longer meant for ordinary purposes.

They were similar to grandma’s fancy china dishes; she used them on only special occasions.

Norma began giving Smash our cat his milk in a small white bowl I once used for dessert.

Now, I don’t even want cereal in that little dish.

We’re set apart to serve God in Christ.

Jesus gave us an example of that *holiness*.

Saints don’t involve God’s *holiness* with the profane.

In Rome, some believers were returning to their old ways of life.

In Romans 6, Paul rebuked those faltering *saints* for their lapses after their baptism into Christ:

²“We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. . .”

v. ¹⁹“Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to *holiness*.”

The word translated *holiness* could just as well be rendered *being a saint*.

In the New Testament, the English terms holiness, consecration, sanctification, and saint all derive from the same stem *hagio* (ἁγιο).

When we repent of our sins and are baptized into Christ, God’s *Holy Spirit* lives in us.

We are set apart to serve God in Christ.

God’s *Holy Spirit* indwells all baptized believers.

Christians live conscious of the fact that we must glorify God with our hands, mouths, brains, feet—all of our being.

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;

³ Qadosh (קדוש)

(Cont.) "you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."⁴

The writer of Hebrews gave wise warnings:

"Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy;

without holiness no one will see the Lord."

As far as I can determine, no Lectionary includes this verse - *Hebrews 12:14* (NIV).

Do you wonder why the church leaders who designed the Lectionary neglect this warning?

Do you have the holiness God requires to reside in heaven with him?

"Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Consider this fact about Cornelius.

He was a good guy but he wasn't holy; Cornelius wasn't a saint.

How do we know?

As the old song goes; "The Bible tells me so."

The Lord willing, we'll be talking more about Cornelius in the coming weeks.

Today, however, we need to answer two questions.

- **Does God hear sinners' prayers?**
- **How do we know that the good guy Cornelius wasn't a saint?**

When I was young, I heard numerous sermons by preachers who insisted that God does not hear the prayers of sinners.

They quoted Scripture for this idea, but their argument was flawed.

They based it on John 9: 31 NIV:

"We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will."

This verse sounds straightforward and convincing.

In reading Scripture, we always follow some rules of interpretation.

Two rules apply here:

- **First, who gave the command or principle? Did it come from God or one of His representatives?**
- **Second, under what circumstances, did God's messenger give the command or principle? God ordered Noah to build an ark. Yet, He never gave anyone else those instructions; not Abraham, Moses, or Elijah, or anyone. Did those old preachers ever check to see who made the John 9 statement about God listening to sinners' prayers?**

As you likely know, John chapter nine tells the story of a blind beggar, whom Jesus gave sight.

The fellow was born blind and he begged; folks now would call him a street person.

⁴ 1 Cor. 6:19, 20 NIV

Instead of being thrilled, praising God for the miracle, and rejoicing with the man, Jesus’ enemies hassled the guy and accused both him and Jesus of being sinners.

That’s when the formerly blind fellow said:

“We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.”

The blind man wasn’t speaking on God’s authority; he simply echoed what he’d heard all his life.

Apparently, some of my preacher friends simply restated stuff they’d heard other preachers say.

Actually, the Bible gives repeated examples of God listening to sinners.

Last week we noted how the prophet Jonah disobeyed God’s order to go east and warn the citizens of Nineveh to repent.

Jonah went to Joppa and booked passage on a ship bound for Spain—about as far west as an Israelite could go in his day.

The Lord created a violent storm that threatened to sink the ship. When it became clear that Jonah’s disobedience caused the storm, the only solution was to toss Jonah overboard.

That’s how Jonah got swallowed by the sea creature.

In the belly of that sea creature, he was dangerously close to his end.

Could you class Jonah as anything but a sinner?

God listened to his prayer.

Yet Jonah still needed to obey God, didn’t he?

Let’s go north again to Caesarea and look at Cornelius’ situation.

He was a good man, had a great family and did good things, but he wasn’t a saint and he wasn’t saved.

He wasn’t yet set aside to serve God.

Why do I say this?

In Acts 11, Peter tells the Apostles and Jerusalem church leaders about a vision he had just before the three men in our text today arrived at the place where Peter was at Simon, the Tanner’s.

In Acts 11:13 & 14, Peter related what the angel said to Cornelius when he appeared to him:

“Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.”

What was that message?

Acts 10: 37-43 relates what Peter told Cornelius and his household.

The message includes the Good News recited throughout Acts and the New Testament:

- **God sent Jesus.**
- **Human beings crucified him.**
- **God raised him three days later.**
- **Jesus is now at God’s right hand.**

- **Only Jesus can forgive you of sin and bring you back from death.**
- **To receive God's grace and His Spirit, we change our lives, accept Christ, and are baptized for the forgiveness of our sins.**

This is the *word* Captain Cornelius needed to hear: God's people glorify Him in Christ.

That's what *saints* should be doing:

The Book of Acts repeatedly tells that church people (*saints*) glorify God.

- *Saints* glorify God because He Created us and all things.
Saints don't worry, fret, and complain about the sins of others; they follow the Apostles' teaching, testify to Jesus' resurrection, and praise God.⁵
- *Saints* glorify God because Christ saved folks from every tribe, language, people, and nation.⁶

God's "intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."⁷

⁵ Acts 2:42-47

⁶ Revelation 5:9-14

⁷ Ephesians 3:9-12 NIV

I pray that we in the church share this goal and:

- **Continue to serve God as his *saints* in holiness:**
"How can we who have died to sin still live in it?"
- "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; *without holiness no one will see the Lord.* ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless..."⁸

God bless you!

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⁸ Hebrews 12:14-16 NIV

My Notes

Acts 10:1-8 NIV

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2 Corinthians 1:1 NIV

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Above photos show: top left: aerial view of Caesarea’s harbor area built by King Herod in the first century BC. In the lower left of the pic, amphitheater, which is still used for concerts and plays. Top right; remnants of breakwater Herod built so his port could accommodate ocean-going ships. Bottom right: hippodrome built for horse and chariot races, and other spectacles . Herod also had an aqueduct (bottom left) constructed to bring water from springs about ten miles northeast. Caesarea is a popular summer beach and tourist area now.

Romans 6: 2-4, & v. 19 NIV

“We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. . .”

“Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.”



Map from MSWord ClipArt- arrows by Bob
 Purple Arrow-Jerusalem
 Red Arrow –Joppa
 Green Arrow – Plain of Sharon (farming area)
 Blue Arrow- Caesarea; Approx. distance from Joppa , 30 miles
 Dark Arrow- Vicinity of Jonah’s home

1 Cor. 6:19, 20 NIV

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Hebrews 12:14 NIV

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John 9:31 NIV

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Acts 11:13 & 14 NIV

“Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.”

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- How can we who have died to sin still live in it?”

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“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless...”