

Does the Case of Cornelius Prove the “Sinner’s Prayer” Doctrine?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Does not the case of Cornelius, the Roman soldier (Acts 10), prove that God hears the prayers of those who have not been baptized? The angel told Cornelius, ‘your prayer has been heard’ (Acts 10:31), and yet the centurion was not baptized until later. Can you explain the apparent conflict between this case and the idea that God does *not* hear the sinner’s prayer?

There are several important facts that need to be established in responding to your question—for which we are grateful. Reason with me, please.

God is omniscient

One of the fundamental Bible truths relative to God is that of his [omniscience](#). This is a term that signifies “all-knowing.” Jehovah knows everything there is to know—past, present, and future. He is “a God of knowledge” (1 Samuel 2:3), who “knows all things” (1 John 3:20). The Lord’s “understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5). All things are “naked and laid open before the eyes” of the Almighty (Hebrews 4:13).

It is quite clear, therefore, that God is **aware** of the sinner’s prayer.

The key question, however, is this. Does God respond to the alien sinner’s prayer, in **granting forgiveness of sins**, separate from the plan He Himself initiated within the New Covenant? By the expression “alien sinner,” we mean the sinful person who has never surrendered to the conditions of the Gospel system, and thus who stands outside of a Father-child relationship with the Creator.

The New Testament reveals God’s “New Birth” plan

The New Testament is unequivocal in its instruction as to what it takes to access a praying relationship with God, whereby the Heavenly Father bestows pardon for sins committed. The Father-child connection in the spiritual family of God is accessed (as in a physical relationship) by means of a “birth” process.

This was precisely the message of Christ in his instructive conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3-5). This process, in principle, consists of:

1. the implantation of the seed (gospel preaching — 1 Corinthians 4:15);
2. a conception (the production of “faith” — 1 John 5:1 — ASV; 1 Peter 1:23); and,
3. the birth process (deliverance out of the water of immersion — Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5).

This new union with God grants the Christian the privilege to pray, “My Father in heaven ... ”

Examples in Acts

There is not one case of conversion in the book of Acts in which the outside-of-Christ sinner prayed for (and received) pardon from his past sins. Saul of Tarsus, in fact, is a demonstrable case to the contrary. Indeed, Cornelius himself is another example.

Saul prayed for three days, and yet was instructed: “[A]rise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 9:18; 22:16).

Similarly, though there was a **sense** in which the prayer of Cornelius was “heard” (Acts 10:31), clearly it was not “heard” in the granting of pardon. This is evidenced by the fact that the prayer was “heard” before the centurion ever met Peter, and yet, it was by the apostle’s mouth that he was to hear “words” (the gospel) whereby he **might be saved** (Acts

11:14). That settles the Cornelius-prayer issue.

Having argued our case upon the basis of biblical evidence, we feel that we must add one dimension yet that warrants exploration. We would urge the reader to consider the following facts.

Heaven's Desire

There is ample inspired testimony that our loving God is not desirous of seeing any person die in a mode of rebellion (1 John 4:8; Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9). He is moved by the honest person who is of a contrite disposition (Psalm 34:18). He wants those who hunger and thirst after righteousness to be filled (Matthew 5:6).

His compassionate interest in lost humanity is so intense that he was willing to sacrifice his beloved Son as an atonement for human iniquity (John 3:16), even though man was the sinful enemy of his Creator (Romans 5:6ff). File this concept away for the moment.

The Honest Response

The most terrifying thought that a person will ever entertain is the reality that he is lost — that there is the potential that he could be separated eternally from the “Father of all mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).

What will be the attitude of an **honest** person when he comes face-to-face with this stark reality, and yet he **does not know** what to do in order to access divine forgiveness? Most likely he will pray instinctively — just as Saul of Tarsus did (Acts 9:11).

The venerable David Lipscomb once noted that “when a man believes in God and realizes that he is lost, he cannot help praying” (*Queries and Answers*, Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1963, p. 341).

Does this imply that the Lord will set aside the plan that he has implemented across the centuries, and save that person **independent of obedience** to the terms of sacred law (Hebrews 5:8-9)? It does not.

It might well be suggested, however, that God could, and would, respond to the honest sinner's prayer by setting in motion such providential actions as would allow the searching person an exposure to the gospel plan. This is a marvelous thought to contemplate.

The Macedonian Man: Begging for the Gospel

Let us consider a case in the book of Acts that strongly points toward the concept suggested above. When Paul (together with Silas) began his third missionary journey, he traveled westward across Asia Minor (Acts 16:1ff). After stops at Derbe and Lystra (where Timothy joined them), they proceeded through that region known as Phrygia/Galatia.

Even though they labored under the great commission, with the obligation to preach the gospel to every creature in all the nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16), for some curious reason the Holy Spirit forbade them to preach in the Roman province of Asia. Accordingly, they skirted the border of Mysia and started to enter Bithynia.

Again, though, the Spirit of Jesus (i.e., the Holy Spirit) did not permit them to proceed. The New Testament student cannot determine whether these two “road-blocks” were effected miraculously, or by providential means. Clearly, however, these men were being guided by divine influence (Acts 16:6-7).











Presently they arrived in Troas. Here, in a vision at night, Paul saw the image of a Macedonian man, pleading, “Come and help us.” Concluding, then, that it was Heaven's will that they evangelize in Europe, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke (who joins the group here in Troas — see “we” v. 10) sail across the Aegean Sea and ultimately make their way to Macedonia. The conversion of Lydia and her household, together with that of the jailor and his family, in Philippi, are perhaps tokens of the “ripeness” of this area for gospel teaching.

Now here is the point toward which we've been progressing. The man in Paul's vision, who “kept on begging” for help (so the force of the imperfect verb in v. 9), quite obviously represented *the longing of honest hearts* who were searching for the truth. Clearly, God “heard” their cries and responded by dispatching his men to that region.

It is important to note, however, that the Lord did not circumvent his own plan of salvation, by issuing pardon to these folks independent of the law of conversion. He did see to it, though, that they had access to the sacred message.

Might he not likewise operate today, in some providential, indirect fashion?

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Scripture References

Acts 10; Acts 10:31; 1 Samuel 2:3; 1 John 3:20; Psalm 147:5; Hebrews 4:13; John 3:3-5; 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 John 5:1; 1 Peter 1:23; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; Acts 9:18, 22:16; Acts 11:14; 1 John 4:8; Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9; Psalm 34:18; Matthew 5:6; John 3:16; Romans 5:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Acts 9:11; Hebrews 5:8-9; Acts 16:1; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 16:6-7

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Fortify Your Faith
P.O. Box 11746
Jackson, Tennessee 38308
Phone: (731) 256-7280 – Fax: (731) 256-5152

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