

YOU GET WHAT YOU PRAY FOR

Eighth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Revival* from Acts 10:24-34 and 43-48
“Cornelius said, ‘Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, and he said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.’” Acts 10:30-31

Williams College in Massachusetts has just been named by *U. S. News and World Report* as the top liberal arts college in the country. If you want to send your child to school there and live on campus, it will set you back about \$45,000 per year. Today Williams College does not evidence much of the Christian vision of those who founded it in 1793. But something happened there long ago that still affects you and me and billions of other people: A group of students prayed.

In 1806 a twenty-three year old freshman named Samuel J. Mills enrolled at Williams. He was the son of a Connecticut pastor. (No doubt tuition was a little less in those days!) Mills had come to faith in Christ after a deep struggle within his soul, but as a result, a mighty passion to spread the gospel pulsated in his heart. It was an August Saturday. The weather was hot and muggy. Mills and four fellow students gathered as they did twice a week in the maple grove near the college, to pray together. Suddenly the clouds opened up and rain began beating down. The five ran for shelter behind a giant haystack in the meadow. They began to pray that God would raise up American missionaries who would take the gospel to people who had never heard of Jesus, who lived in the far off nations of Asia. Two years later, Mills and other Williams College students formed an association which they called “The Brethren.” It was dedicated to “effect, in the persons of its members, a mission to the heathen.” They were joined two years after that by Adoniram Judson and others, and in 1812 the first American missionaries set off for Calcutta, India. Today at the site of the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” on the Williams College campus there stands a marble monument with a three foot globe on top. Inscribed on it are these words: “The Field is the World.” That rain-soaked prayer meeting was the beginning of America’s world missions movement.

We’ve been talking this Summer about revival and about the tools God uses to bring revival about. Today we’re going to look at the role of prayer in the work of revival, and about our practice of prayer. Turn with me to Acts 10. We’ll proceed in three parts, focusing on the man Cornelius: **1. Who was Cornelius?** **2. What did Cornelius do?** and, **3. What did God do in response to what Cornelius did?** And we’ll discover what God does in response to our prayers.

1. Who was Cornelius? In order to appreciate what happened to Cornelius, we must know some things about him. The first two verses of chapter 10 tell us, “*There was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort; a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually.*” Cornelius was a centurion. That means he was an officer in the Roman army in charge of a company of a hundred men. His equivalent rank in the United States army today would probably be captain. His outfit was an elite fighting force, something like our green berets. The

“Italian Battalion,” as it was called, was assigned the tough security jobs. Judea was a hotbed of radical Jewish anger, and Cornelius and his men were stationed in Caesarea, Rome’s glorious provincial capital that Herod the Great had built on the Mediterranean coast about 63 miles northwest of Jerusalem. It boasted a magnificent artificial harbor that made Caesarea the main port in that part of the world. It had theaters and arenas that were the venue for world class sporting events. The magnificent governor’s palace and the government administration complex was a showcase of Roman pomp and power.

Verse 2 says that Cornelius was a “*devout man.*” He had completed two of the three necessary steps for a Gentile to become part of the Old Testament church. He had made a public profession of faith and had passed through the purification ceremony of sprinkling by water—baptism, if you will—that was the equivalent of John the Baptist’s baptism, not of Gentiles, but of Jews who were repenting of sin in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. (We discussed this a couple of weeks ago). But Cornelius had stopped short of the third requirement, circumcision. So, he remained outside of Judaism. Verse 2 tells us that Cornelius had brought his entire household to a similar faith, and that he regularly did two things. He gave “*many alms,*” that is, gifts to help the poor and assist people in need; and he “*prayed to God continually.*” Cornelius showed by his actions that he loved God. Talking regularly to the true God seems strange behavior for a pagan soldier, doesn’t it? On this particular day, we are told, God responded to his prayers. An angel appeared to him while he was praying and said in verse 4, “*Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.*” God noticed! You and I haven’t experienced angels meeting us when we pray. But we should be assured that God also notices us when we pray and when we serve him.

2. What did Cornelius do? Let’s look first of all at **Cornelius’ practice of prayer.** Verse 2 says he prayed continually. That means he had regular times set aside for prayer. Verse 3 says it was “*about the ninth hour of the day.*” It was about 3:00 in the afternoon. Cornelius undoubtedly prayed at other times, but the middle of the afternoon was apparently a point when he could shut the door of his office and spend a few minutes talking to God. The apostle Paul says we ought to do the same thing. In I Thessalonians 5:17 he says, “*Pray without ceasing.*” In Ephesians 6:18 he says, “*With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.*” Do you do that? Praying without ceasing doesn’t mean that all you do is pray. It means that you and I should persist in our prayers. Answers don’t usually come after only one brief prayer. We should keep praying until God responds. Praying at all times means that we practice an on-going conversation with God, much like when we talk back and forth with a companion.

One of the best ways to become a person of prayer is, like Cornelius, to establish set times when you pray. Get up early before the kids wake up. Barb and I used to do that when our sons were small. We’d lie in bed, half unconscious, and talk with God together. It was the only time we could do it. Now we pray after breakfast or as we take the dog for an early morning walk. Pray at meal times. That’s why Christians say “grace” or “the blessing” before we eat. Pray at night before you go to sleep. Train

yourself to pray when you stop at traffic lights or when you hear a siren or at the top of each hour. Get into the habit of regular prayer.

A second thing to investigate here is, **what Cornelius prayed about.** We find a clue in what the angel told Cornelius to do, and by what Cornelius' delegation told Peter. In verse 22 Cornelius' agents said, "*Cornelius...was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.*" Peter's message was the answer to Cornelius' prayer. Peter told Cornelius about Jesus. Verse 43 summarizes what he said. "*Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of his sins.*" Cornelius was praying to understand how he could be forgiven. He had promised publicly to obey God's commandments. He had done good deeds—given money to the poor. But he realized that even if he could live perfectly from that time onward, all his obedience, all those good deeds, could not cancel out his sins. He had grown up as a pagan. He was a soldier. Soldiers kill people. The army can be an immoral place. Cornelius' conscience was bothering him! But he also realized that even now, with his growing knowledge of God and how God wants us to live, he still kept on sinning. Jesus said, "*You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" (Matthew 5:48) You and I can never be perfect. If you've ever tried, you know. So, Cornelius' prayer to God was, "God, how can I be forgiven? I can't go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. I can't serve you well enough. Yet I want to be right with you! Help me to know how." How can you be saved? How can you avoid God's judgment? That should be a matter of great concern for each of us. But think of what we pray for! "Lord, I'm sick. Lord, I need more money. Lord, my marriage is falling apart." There's nothing wrong with praying for those things. But we'd better pray, "Lord, how may I be saved?"

There's a third thing that Cornelius did. **He gathered his family and they listened together.** Look at verse 24. When Peter arrived after a two-day, thirty mile hike, "*Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.*" In verse 33 he told Peter, "*We are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.*" Think about this for a moment. In America we consider a relationship with Christ something personal. For Cornelius it was indeed personal, but he had a much bigger understanding of what was at stake. He was concerned for his family. In chapter 11, verse 14, when Peter recounts what had taken place, he repeats what the angel had said: "*He shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.*" Cornelius' household was composed of more than himself and his wife and their children. It included his extended family—perhaps his mother-in-law, maybe his brother and his wife and children—I don't know. Households were large in those days. His household certainly included his servants and their children. There may have been 40 or 50 people. And then there were his friends. Some of the soldiers under his command. His fellow officers. Social contacts in the city of Caesarea. So the group may have exceeded 60 or 70, counting children. But it was certainly more than the 4-5 in our households. What this tells us about Cornelius is that he wanted his family and friends to know God. He'd taught them the Bible. He'd conducted prayer gatherings with them. He wanted them to be saved from their sins. Ask yourself, "How much concern do I have for my family and friends? What am I

doing about it?” Their eternal salvation is the single most important issue in their lives. Do you set them an example of how to live? Do you bring them week by week to worship as a family? Do you insist that your children participate in the appropriate fellowship and ministry of the church that is designed for them? Do you gather your family daily to study the Bible together in family devotions? Do you pray with them? And most important, do you pray *for* them? Barb and I have prayed each day for our sons since before they were born, pleading with God to work in their hearts and lives. We pray for their wives, and for their children because God answers those prayers. Cornelius did that. Then he gathered them all together so they could hear about Jesus.

3. What did God do in response to what Cornelius did? God did three things. First, **he sent an angel** in answer to Cornelius’ prayer. You and I don’t need angels because we have the church which accomplishes the same purpose. It’s the responsibility of the church to direct people to the place where they can know God. So, pray for the church! Second, **God sent Peter with the message:** Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay for the sins of sinners like you and me. If any person turns from his sin and places his trust in Christ alone to save him, he will be forgiven, accepted by God, and given the gift of eternal life. Third, **God sent his Spirit** upon those gathered at Cornelius’ house. Verses 44-45 tell us that they began to speak in tongues. That is, they bore witness to God’s grace using certifiable human languages that they did not know, but which were probably recognized as the childhood languages of many of the people who were in that diverse group of Gentiles and Jewish Christians. Why did God do that? Because this was the first time that Gentiles were brought into the church. God was making sure that everyone understood that people from all over the world are welcome may be included in Christ’s church—even those who have not grown up knowing about the true God—on the same basis as those of us who have grown up in Christian homes. As a result, Peter baptized them on the spot—probably not by immersion but by sprinkling with water. And he baptized the tiny children of those new believers as well, because they were part of the household. Baptism didn’t save those children. It meant that the promises of God belonged to them, and they could claim them when they grew old enough to understand. Parents care for their children. What a wonderful blessing it is that our kids are included with us in God’s family!

Applications. All of this came about because Cornelius prayed. Let’s draw some applications. First, **God answers when we pray.** I heard about a woman who put this message on her telephone answering machine: “Hi! I’m probably home—I’m just avoiding someone I don’t like. Leave a message, and if I don’t call back, it’s you.” Do you ever feel that way about God? You pray, he doesn’t respond, and you figure he probably doesn’t like you. That’s not it. God hears when we pray. But answers to prayer are more complicated than what we often ask for. Cornelius didn’t expect an angel. He didn’t expect Peter. He didn’t expect Jesus, and he didn’t expect the Holy Spirit. God gave more than he prayed for. He’ll do that for you. So, pray and don’t stop.

Second, one of the best encouragements to prayer is to **pray with others in a small group.** That’s what the Haystack Prayer Meeting was—a small group. A small group provides intimacy which lets us be honest in our Christian growth. We need the

support of fellow believers whom we've grown to trust. They back up our prayers, they share our hopes and fears, they support us in grief and sorrow. And they rejoice with us when God blesses. At Cornerstone we offer small group Bible studies for women and discipleship groups for men. Teens have small groups through our youth ministry. Now we are forming new groups for couples. I encourage you to be in one.

Take this story of Cornelius and apply it to your own situation. Who do you know who needs to know Christ? Start with yourself. Have you trusted Jesus as your savior? If not, come to him today and receive him by faith. Begin growing in a relationship with the eternal God. What about your children? Lead them to God. Pray with them. Show them how to follow Christ. Reach out to your friends and invite them to join you in discovering Jesus. Don't let the people who mean most to you miss out on knowing Jesus. And pray that revival will sweep through our church and our community.

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