

## A Love Story: Their Story

**Acts 10:1-2(NKJV)** <sup>1</sup>There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, <sup>2</sup>a devout *man* and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

### **Acts 10:22(NKJV)**

And they 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.”

### **Acts 10:28-29(NKJV)**

Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

## **Series Introduction**

Love stories involve people. A man falls in love with a woman, the woman falls in love with the man and then they are in love. We have all heard stories of how a man’s love caused him to put his life on the line and conquer insurmountable obstacles to be with the woman he loved. Or we have heard the stories of the sacrifices of parents who loved their children in ways others can’t explain. These stories inspire us and make us want to love and be loved like that.

The greatest love story ever told is the story of God’s love for us. It’s the story of a God who loved a people who were not worthy of his love. And still, he loved us so, that he sacrificed his life to save us. The beauty of the story is that it is still being written today. Each of us has a story to add to the praise and glory of our God.

For the month of February we are exploring God’s love story. His love story has four chapters; Your Story, Their Story, His Story, and Our Story. It is my hope that God’s love story will inspire each of us to be used by God to share the story with others. Last week we began with Your Story. Today we will continue with Their Story. We will look at my story, your story, and their story. Then we will conclude for the day.

## **My Story**

Last week I shared with you the fact that I grew up in church. As far back as I can remember, I was in church. I needed what the church had to offer but I never chose church. I didn't make the deliberate decision to go there on my own.

There were other people in my life who knew the value of a relationship with God and they loved me enough to steer me to the church. I was curious to know why out of all the things they could do to express their love for me, why did they include introducing me to God. Why would they go out of their way to insure I was in church? So I asked. I called my mother first.

### *Mother:*

When I asked my mother why getting me to church was so important this is what she said. My great grandmother told her I would either be wise, a fool, or die at an early age. My mother wanted me to be wise and the only way to do that was to get to know God. She said she decided from that moment she wanted what was best for me.

She worked to get me to church because she believed it helped us to grow more spiritual and be better people. By going to church we learned God's values and we would know the love of God. In her own life she knew that even if she had problems if I knew God for myself, I would still be strong enough to survive. She wanted me to experience God before I went into the world as an adult. She said she knew that if I learned to depend on God she wouldn't have to worry because everything would be alright.

### *Father:*

I called my father and asked him the same question. He said he felt it was important because the church would teach me to have a disciplined life. From his perspective church taught us how to have interaction with other people. He said that having exposure to God would better me in life. I would be around people with other ideas and be able to interact with them. It would give me a healthy respect for all religion and expose me to different styles of worship.

More importantly, going to church would help me learn how to conduct myself like a person should in a civilized way. People today who commit certain crimes in the streets don't have those values instilled in them. They don't know how to conduct themselves in a civilized way because they didn't get into the church environment to learn from the experiences and principles we teach. They didn't learn about turning the other cheek. They didn't learn do unto others before they do unto you.

He also said there were family traditions established through church. We passed down those traditions to our children. There was a transfer of values, important values. He said even if I had bad habits, I would at least know better.

In my life, there were people who just knew that I needed what was inside the church. So they sent me to church. They took me to church. They brought me to church. There were people in my life who understood that the most valuable asset I could have in my life was faith in God.

*The measure of what kind of man I would become was directly related to the godliness that was deposited within me. It would do me no good to gain the world and lose my soul.*

## **Your Story**

Think back. Think back as early in your life as you can. Think back to the first time you knew there was a God. Who was the person who introduced you to God? Who was it who told you God existed and he loved you? Somewhere in your life, some **other** person believed in God enough, and cared about **you** enough to tell you about God. Somebody else, it may have been a family member, a Sunday School teacher, a friend or a neighbor, who led you to church.

These were people who knew they were loved by God and believed you needed his love too.

If we look back at our communities over the past 3 or 4 decades, we can all remember people who just knew if we got to church, everything would be alright. They knew that we would have a better chance of making it in this world if we put God first. They knew that if we just got to know God, he would take care of us and steer us in the right direction.

They stood by you and they encouraged you and they supported you and prayed for you. They loved you even when you were unlovely. The people in church didn't like the things you did, but they loved you with the love of God. They didn't always agree with your decisions in life but they still tried to get you to come to church. They may have frowned on your lack of commitment but they wanted you here to learn about God.

At church there were always people who tried to teach you what was right. **Even if they were not always so holy, they at least told you the right thing to do.** The people who loved you enough to introduce you to God were moved by God's love for themselves and their knowledge of the fact that God loved you.

Let's be honest. Some of us have some rough stories. Before we came to God, some of us lived lives so full of sin, we were afraid we would burst into flames if we stepped foot in the church.

Some of you were prostitutes before you came to God. I know you may say you never stood on a corner, but not all prostitutes stand on corners. Some of you were drunks before you came to God. It wasn't always alcohol. Some of you were drunk on power, pride, and lust. Some of you were thieves. You stole joy from people. You robbed others of opportunities because they were going to pass you on the ladder of success.

Some of you may have lived alternative lifestyles. You were attention starved and looked for love from anybody you could get it from. Some of you were self-centered and stingy. Some of you were racists toward your own people. Some of you were malicious. Some of you were mean, hateful, evil, conniving, ruthless, cutthroat, manipulative, back biting son of a guns.

You might have been the last person any of your friends would have ever expected to see in church. You might have been the last person in your family anyone ever thought would give your life to God. You might have been the person that people just believed would never be forgiven by God for what you did.

### **But God loved you.**

None of those things were enough to keep God from loving you. None of those things made God withdraw his love. He still believed your story was important enough for him to send his son to die for you. He loved you enough to send some of his own children to reach you. He still sent people into your life who loved you enough to invite you to church.

*So when you look at the people in our world who don't know God, you should be able to relate to their story. Their story is no different than your own. Cornelius was one of those people in the scriptures. Let's talk about Their Story.*

### **Their Story**

**Acts 10:1-2(NKJV)** <sup>1</sup>There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, <sup>2</sup>a devout *man* and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

Cornelius is a pretty good guy. He was a working man who was devout and feared God. He was a giving man and he prayed. But there was something working against him: he was a Gentile.

In the religious culture of the first church in Jerusalem, most of the new Christians were Jews. Because of this, they brought many of their Jewish customs and beliefs into the church. One very strong Jewish custom was the law that said Jews were to have no dealings with Gentiles.

Jews didn't interact with Gentiles. They didn't eat with Gentiles. They didn't marry Gentiles. They didn't travel through Gentile cities. They didn't allow Gentiles to come into the sanctuary. They had a 3 foot wall that separated them from the Gentiles outside the sanctuary. The wall had an inscription on it that let Gentiles know if they crossed the wall, they had taken their lives into their own hands.

This Cornelius who was seeking God was a Gentile. He wasn't welcomed in the church. He was an outcast. He was socially unacceptable. He was one of **those people**.

Those people don't look like us.

Those people don't dress like us.

Those people don't act like us.

Those people do those things.

Those people go those places.

Those people can't sit in my seat.

Those people need to get right before they come to church.

Those people have those kids.

Those people are out of control.

Those people are unclean.

I don't speak to those people.

I don't work with those people.

I won't sing with those people.

Cornelius was one of those people. God **loved** those people. God sent his son to die for **those people**. And on this particular day, God's love reached Peter while he was praying on the roof.

### **Acts 10:9-16(NKJV)**

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.

God showed Peter unclean animals and told him to eat. Peter resisted God's direct command because he didn't eat **those things**. The issue was not about eating unclean things. It was about ministering to unclean people. You see, they may be unclean now, but God can cleanse them in ways that we could never imagine.

God can take common people and make them peculiar.  
God can take broken people and make them whole.  
God can take outcasts and make them family.  
God can take their story and make it part of his story.

What God desires is that we love him enough to want what he wants. God wants us to love like he loves.

*God loves those people because their stories bring him glory.*

The story of a changed life is a powerful witness of the love of God. Only his grace and mercy would allow a person the chance to be transformed by his spirit. When we see people who used to be unholy, we praise God for the work he has done in their lives.

Just as God has a plan for your story, he has a plan for their stories too. There are people who have no hope of ever getting right with God. There are people who don't believe God loves them because of the things they have done. There are people like Cornelius who are crying out to God and waiting for an answer.

There are people who are yearning for an abundant life. There are people looking for answers. There are people looking for hope. There are people who are desperately searching for something to believe in.

We are the hands and feet of God. God wants to use us to change their stories. That's what he did for us. God used ordinary people to show his love to us. They loved God enough to be used by him to introduce us to Jesus. Now it's our turn.

God wants us to hear their stories. God wants us to show some compassion. God wants us to share our lives with people who are not like us. God wants to rewrite their stories.

He wants to change their story from unclean to cleansed by his Spirit.  
He wants to change their stories from sin sick to healed by the stripes of Jesus.  
He wants to rewrite their stories from condemned to forgiven.  
He wants to change their stories from wrath to mercy.

God already knows their stories. He knows they are outcasts. He already knows that they are broken. But Jesus died to bring salvation to the whole world. What God has called clean we cannot call common.

If we would allow God to use us, he can make their story a story of victory. He can make their story a story of hope. Their story will become a story of restoration. Their testimony will be a story of deliverance. Their story is a story of love so strong that God would send Jesus to die for them and then send one of us to lead them to Jesus.

## **Conclusion:**

### **2 Corinthians 5:17-19(NKJV)**

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

<sup>18</sup>Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,

<sup>19</sup>that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

The world was full of condemned people, but God loved them anyway. He loved us and he cared about our story. He came down from his throne in glory to walk among us and save us. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

Now that we are saved from the wrath of eternal death, God is still in the world living within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. His love is still reaching out to the world as he seeks to reconcile them to Himself, through us. We are his people and we have been bought with a high price.

So we need to care about the things our master cares about. We need to love what our master loves.