

Acts 11:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 11, verses 1 to 18. Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

But Peter began and explained it to them in order. I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.

Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air, and I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.

But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean do not call common. This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment, three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea.

And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen an angel stand in his house and say, Send to Joppa, and bring Simon who is called Peter.

[1 : 1 8] He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? When they heard these things, they fell silent, and they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

In Acts chapter 10, the gospel had been received by the centurion Cornelius and all of his household. Both Cornelius and Peter had received visions, and when brought together, Peter declared the message of the gospel to his whole household.

They received it gladly, and the Spirit descended upon them in a manner that resembled the events of the day of Pentecost itself. Repetition is an important feature of Acts chapter 10, and this feature of the narrative continues into Acts chapter 11.

It's not just the event, but the communication and recognition of the events by others that is important. Here the events will be recounted to other members of the church in Jerusalem. Their acknowledgement that the Gentiles are true members of the people of God, as Gentiles, is an important part of the story.

[2 : 4 0] This is part of the means by which the two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, will be brought together as one within the church. Word of what has taken place reaches the Judean Christians and the apostles, seemingly not by Peter himself.

When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, he has to put out some fires that the news has started. He's been criticised by the circumcision party. The ground for their criticism does not seem to be that Peter did not circumcise Cornelius and his household, but that he received a Gentile's hospitality and ate with him in the first place.

While Diaspora Jews may have held laxer customs concerning fellowship and hospitality with Gentiles, Judean Jews were far more conservative on the matter and regarded the separateness of Jews from Gentiles as maintaining a very important standard of purity.

While they were very concerned that Peter remained separate from the Gentiles, in chapter 10 verse 20, the Holy Spirit had instructed him to rise and go with them without hesitation. The Lord does not draw those sorts of distinctions.

It seems fitting, given the background of the Gospel of Luke, that there should be such a focus upon eating and table fellowship here. Much of Jesus' ministry and teaching in the Gospel of Luke occurs in the context of the meal table, who you eat with, who is invited, where people sit.

[3 : 56] These are all issues that are prominent within Luke's Gospel, and their importance continues into the story of the early church, which is formed around meal tables. Christ demonstrates his resurrection to his disciples by eating and drinking with them, and the early believers in Jerusalem break bread from house to house.

In chapter 6, the appointment of the seven as important leaders within the life of the early church, centred upon providing for tables. Now the meal table, as a place where the people of God are being gathered and formed, is going to be redefined in another way, as people who were not expected to be invited are invited to take their seats as no less honoured guests, even though many of those already sitting at the table might feel discomforted by their presence.

In response to the concerns of the circumcision party, Peter proceeds to tell the story from the very beginning. While he was in the city of Joppa praying, he saw a vision within which a great sheet descended from heaven by its four corners.

The sheet contained a great many different animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds of the air, unclean creatures that Peter as an observant Jew would have been forbidden to eat. Perhaps we are supposed to see the sheet as a sort of tablecloth, a tablecloth that's spread with all these things that Peter can eat.

In chapter 10, he is described as being hungry at the time, and he's being invited to a meal. When he refuses, the word of the Lord comes to him, what God has made clean do not call common.

[5 : 22] This happens on three occasions, and then the sheet is finally removed. It is at that very moment that the three men sent from Cornelius in Caesarea arrive at Joppa, at the house of Simon the Tanner where Peter is staying.

The spirit then instructs him to go with them, not making a distinction. Peter is also accompanied by six other men, who will serve as Jewish witnesses of what's taking place among the Gentiles.

As he delivers the message of the gospel to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit descends upon them in just the way that he had descended upon the disciples at Pentecost. All of the significance of the event of Pentecost, all of the significance of the Spirit's descent upon the church, was now being applied to the Gentiles, these people that would seem to be outsiders, not included in the covenants of promise, not counted among God's people, nor considered as the children of Abraham.

All of this, for Peter, confirmed the word that Christ had given after his resurrection, that as John had baptised with water, they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit was a sign of God's blessing, the fulfilment of his promise, and marked out the recipients as true members of the people of God.

In light of all of this, not to have fellowship with the Gentiles would be presuming a holiness that exceeded God's own. God had given them his own Holy Spirit. Was Peter to refuse to eat with them?

[6 : 42] The heroes of Peter's account were silenced by it. It was now apparent to them, as it had been to Peter, that the Lord had made the Gentiles recipients of his blessings, just as they had been.

It is worth spending a few moments considering the role of Peter in all of this. Peter elsewhere is described as the apostle to the circumcision. Why is it that Peter was sent to Cornelius?

Surely that would be the task for Paul. Who, as we see in Galatians chapter 2, was commissioned as an apostle to bring the gospel to the uncircumcised. The answer, I believe, is that Peter was chosen for this task precisely as the apostle to the circumcised.

He is the one that could represent the church of the circumcision, and in that capacity recognises brothers and sisters, believers of the Gentiles. Peter's bearing witness to God's reception of the Gentiles in this chapter is a very important part of the story then.

It is for this task particularly that he has been set apart. While some other party, like Philip, could have brought the gospel to Cornelius, it is Peter who is in the best position to recognise the Gentiles.

[7 : 47] Just as Peter and John confirmed the work of God among the Samaritans back in chapter 8, so Peter confirms the work of God among the Gentiles in this chapter. The fact that he is called to give some account of himself suggests that, although Peter is the leading apostle, a fact that we see in a great many different ways within the Gospels, he is not a figure in which all leadership authority is concentrated.

He is expected to give an account of himself to other leaders of the church. A question to consider. In Numbers chapter 11, we read of an event from which some illuminating analogies could be drawn with the story of the Gentiles' reception of the Gospel.

What is the event, and how can those analogies help us to understand what is taking place here? What is the event,