

Peter Defends His Actions

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 February 2025

Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 01] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 23rd, 2025. My name is Kent Dixon and it's my joy to be the pastor here. This morning we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And through this series we've been exploring and are continuing to explore the New Testament book of Acts. Our focused passage this morning is found in Acts 11, verses 1 to 18.

So go ahead and grab a Bible or open your Bible, turn your Bible on, whatever you need to do. Grab one from the pew in front of you or you can listen as I read this passage.

Acts 11, 1 to 18. The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, You went into the house of the uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story. I was in the city of Joppa praying and in trance, this is Peter speaking, I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners and it came down to where I was.

[1 : 13] I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.

I replied, Surely not, Lord. Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth. The voice spoke from heaven a second time. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

This happened three times and it was all, then it was all pulled up to heaven again. Right then, three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying.

The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 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. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

[2 : 16] Then I remembered what the Lord had said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift he gave to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could stand in God's way?

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, So then, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

I have a question for you this morning. Have you ever tried to, ever had to account for your own words or actions? Somehow to explain yourself, something that you did or said maybe.

Maybe you've decided to go to court for a traffic ticket you felt you had received unfairly, unless it's a photo radar ticket, which are pretty hard to dispute.

It is you. It is a picture of you. Maybe you made a decision at some point in your career or your job. You had to explain to a manager or supervisor why you'd made the choice.

[3 : 20] It's really about being held accountable for our words or actions in some way, isn't it? Have you ever, did you ever get called to the principal's office when you were in school?

I am, as some of you know, a rule follower to the extreme for the most part. But I was called down to the office in elementary school for a transgression of some kind. Now, it's interesting, too.

While I have no recollection of the details of what I did to wind up there, I clearly remember what it felt like to be sitting there. I remember the office. I remember the anxiety of waiting and having to account for my actions.

I talked a bit about human nature last week, and I think it's human nature for us to feel anxious, fearful, prideful, or even angry when we're called to account for something that we have said or done.

We may get defensive. We may seek to justify our actions. Maybe you've experienced that yourself. That may be because it's not too often we're asked to account for our behavior in good situations, is it?

[4 : 31] When was the last time someone called you aside and said something like, you blew out those candles and ate cake after people sang to you? Did you care to explain yourself? Well, accounting for behavior in good situations is definitely not as common, if it ever happens at all.

We're probably all familiar with that saying that news travels fast, or even good news travels fast, right? But I think we can also agree that bad news travels fast, too, it seems to.

And at times, it may even be the fastest of all. We're going to get a bit of a sense of that this morning. So you may remember from our sermon last week that I mentioned we'd be looking at two different accounts of the conversion of Cornelius.

So to get the full picture of any situation, it's often helpful to examine it from different perspectives. In the case of the first conversion of a Gentile believer, I think it's important for us to seek to get as complete a picture as possible of these events.

The purpose or the perspective that we got last week was from Luke's retelling of these events. But this morning, we're going to get an account of what happened from Peter directly.

[5 : 44] One thing I want to point out from when we looked at the events of Cornelius' conversion from Luke's account last week, when Peter was summoned from Joppa by Cornelius, did Peter go and visit him alone?

Do you remember? We learned that some of the brothers, Scripture tells us, from Joppa went with him. And Peter brought other Jewish believers with him to serve as bodyguards?

Scintillating conversationalists, perhaps, to help the journey pass by better? Nope. He brought them along as witnesses. The news of Cornelius' conversion spread quickly.

And our passage tells us this morning that the apostles, we can assume this means the other 11, and the brothers throughout Judea, Scripture says, learned that Gentiles had now received the Word of God.

Non-Jewish followers of Jesus had now been let into this circle. And everyone was excited and celebrated, right? Well, not exactly.

[6 : 50] When Peter returns to Jerusalem, he is criticized by the Jewish believers. So most Jewish believers would have believed that God only offered salvation to the Jews.

Well, how can we come to this conclusion? Well, they would have seen that because God gave the law to them through Moses, that would have meant that this truth, this story, this gospel story, was meant for them.

Some Jewish believers may have believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they became circumcised, followed Jewish laws, essentially became Jews themselves.

But for the Gentiles to simply be open to salvation and have the same access to God, it really wasn't something they would have been able to wrap their heads around. It would not have computed for them.

They didn't understand that the mystery that was being unveiled with Christ, the gospel, is for non-Jews as well. That God wants one church composed of many different people.

[7 : 57] Remember, Luke gives us two accounts of Cornelius' conversion, one from his perspective, given as it occurred, and then another from Peter's perspective, when Peter is called to give account for his actions.

So, let's consider Peter's description. This may feel all too familiar, but there's a reason for this, and we'll recognize it. So, Peter has a vision.

While praying in Joppa, in a trance, Peter has a vision of a sheet descending from heaven that has all sorts of creatures on it. And a voice tells him, Rise, Peter. Kill and eat.

So, initially, as we've learned, Peter objects, because he's never eaten anything common or what he would consider to be unclean. So, to Peter, culturally and religiously, it may have felt, in some way, that God was telling him to sin.

God had given him these rules to follow, so he had been following them, and then all of a sudden, it might have seemed to Peter that God was changing his mind. And Peter had already been preaching the gospel for at least seven years at this point.

[9 : 06] And Jesus told him and the other apostles, You will go into all the world to preach the gospel. But in their centuries-old Jewish way of thinking, they likely thought that they would only be preaching to Jews, to Jewish people, from different parts of the world.

That may have been their filter. And the thought of preaching to pagan Gentiles, the idea that they could be saved through Jesus, without becoming culturally and religiously Jewish, would have largely been unthinkable to them.

But the voice tells Peter, What God has cleansed, you must not call common. And as we know from last week, this vision was repeated three times.

Repetition, right? To get that message driven home. So then the Spirit instructs Peter, in our story we learn, Three men from Caesarea arrive as Peter contemplates this vision.

And the Spirit tells Peter to go with them, and to not doubt what he's being asked to do. Six brethren from Joppa went with Peter to Caesarea, to Cornelius' house.

[10 : 14] And those same six men were then now with Peter, these witnesses, were with Peter in Jerusalem, as he's accounting for his actions. Peter then switches to talk about what he had learned from Cornelius.

Cornelius had seen an angel standing in his house, and the angel told him to send to Joppa, and to specifically ask for Peter. Acts 11.14 says, Peter to Cornelius will tell you the words by which you and all your household will be saved.

So the Spirit gives Cornelius direction to call for Peter, and then encourages him to trust what Peter will say, and to do what he tells him to do.

Peter explains that he recognized, Peter speaking here, As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come upon us at the beginning.

So any of the Jewish believers who were already upset by what Peter had done may not have been thrilled by this comparison, right? That the Gentiles had received essentially the same outpouring of the Spirit that they had received themselves.

[11 : 27] So what they believed to be special, they may now have seemed to have been tarnished somewhat by being shared with someone else. So Peter shares that he had reflected on Jesus' promise to the apostles, that those who believed, anyone who believed, would receive the Holy Spirit.

And Peter, in recognizing this, says that it convinced him personally that if God gave the Gentiles the same gift that was given to the apostles when they believed on the Lord, who is he, Peter, to stand in the way of God's plan?

Powerful realization there. It's interesting to me that while the reaction to what Peter had done was so negative and even initially borderline hostile, once the initial intellectual and theological questions had been addressed by Peter, all the questions posed to him, he had answered clearly, his audience seemed to have calmed right down.

And we hear, we read in this passage that they had no further objections. So they were annoyed, they asked questions, they received answers, and they were okay with it.

It calmed them down. And even more than that, Scripture tells us that they praised God almost immediately after Peter speaks. So there's no question, I think, that the Spirit would have been, was at work here.

[12 : 55] The Spirit was uniting the believers, helping them to see, to understand, and then ultimately to even praise God for the plan that he had been working out all along.

Peter's account silenced the critics and objectors, and it led to the Gentiles being considered to be acceptable recipients of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And Peter's account also includes a few details that I want to take note of. So let's look at a few things. First of all, the order in which the events occurred.

So Peter, it says, Peter explained everything to them precisely as it had occurred. And so we recognize a lot of things that point to Peter's personality, his character, his strengths, his challenges, things like that throughout the New Testament.

But there's one thing about Peter. He seems to have been a very type A kind of person, right? Very black and white, very direct, but very, excuse me, very orderly, very focused, very, this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened.

[14 : 07] A very systematic kind of person. So, if there's any question as to the sequence of events between what Luke tells us earlier in this chapter, and then what Peter tells us when he defends his actions, Peter's first-hand eyewitness account, as we've learned, eyewitness accounts are important, Peter's account would take precedence.

So if there's ever any question about what Luke says doesn't seem to line up with what Peter says, Peter's account of the events would be, would take precedence. What about the moment when Cornelius was saved?

So remember that Cornelius was told to send for Peter who would tell him, Scripture says, what you must do, and then a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

So from this, and from what we see in other conversion accounts in Scripture, and we considered last week that Cornelius was not saved, until he heard the words, Scripture says.

So until he heard the message of the gospel, Cornelius would not have been saved. Remember we talked about him being a clearly religious man, but we decided that that's not enough.

[15 : 26] And then not only hearing the words, but then to obey what he was told to do. So there's hearing the message, hearing the gospel, and then obeying what the directives would have been coming from them.

So what were the words then that he and his household were told to do? Well, first of all, this bridges with what we just talked about. They were told to believe.

So not just hear the gospel. Remember, we've talked about this many times in the past. It's not enough to just hear the gospel, but we need to believe it. Right? We need to make it part of who we are.

We need to let it change us. So people were told to believe the gospel. And then they were told to be baptized. And we've looked at this many times.

The connection that seems to be clear in the New Testament is between Jesus saying, believe, believe who I am, believe that my father sent me, believe the gospel, but then also be baptized.

[16 : 28] And we also see the apostles sing over and over throughout the New Testament. that's the sequence of events. So believe in this message of the gospel and then be baptized.

These things seem to be linked together. So the spirit at work. We can see the spirit very clearly and powerfully at work in this whole story, can't we?

He prompted Cornelius to send for Peter. And then he encouraged Cornelius to trust what Peter would say and do. So he's sending for someone he may have heard of by reputation or by word of mouth.

But then he's sending for this person he essentially doesn't know, certainly doesn't know personally, and then is instructed to trust what Peter will tell him. Then the spirit prompts Peter to go to Cornelius and share the gospel.

So Peter is listening. Peter is responding to the prompting of the spirit and doing what the spirit is asking him to do. And the spirit challenged the views and expectations of all the Jewish believers.

[17 : 38] We've looked at that pretty significantly this morning that they had expectations. They had preconceived notions of how things should work and the spirit was challenging those views and expectations.

And then the spirit was also revealing God's plan to reconcile all nations. So it would give the opportunity for all people to receive Jesus as Lord.

For all people to receive forgiveness and salvation through God's grace. For all people regardless of national or cultural origin to be saved in the same way through the same message.

Peter's defense of his actions really silenced those who accused him of impropriety who accused him of socializing with Gentiles and with sharing the gospel with them.

Peter was called to account for his actions and choices but he could do that with confidence. Why? Well because he had acted in obedience to God.

[18 : 43] He had acted with the prompting power and encouragement of the Holy Spirit. In the story of Cornelius' conversion we can recognize some pretty significant shifts in thinking that needed to happen.

Right? Expectations around theological and cultural things assumptions that needed to take place. Things that needed to be changed.

And those things are never easy. If the change that God is calling us to make in our lives calling you or I to make in our attitudes in our expectations if it's actually something that's intended to change to soften our human pride and arrogance some people will never change.

And this was actually the case for many early Christians. But it's important for us to remember there's nothing strange about turmoil or struggle in our lives. Did anybody ever try and tell you or suggest that the Christian life would be an easy one?

I hope not because you can probably attest in your own life that's not the case. But do you want some hope? I have some hope for you this morning. When we are weak God's grace makes us strong.

[20 : 03] It makes us more dependent on Him and less dependent on the world. One of the major parts of living the Christian life is having the Lord constantly change our views.

Change our selfish expectations. change our sinful feelings or our cultural assumptions because He is changing us.

He is refining us. It's called sanctification. It's God's process of making us more and more into the image of His Son. That's the goal folks.

Making us more into the people that He has always intended for us to be. So I challenge you. Here's some homework for you and some things to think about.

Take some time to consider what shifts in thinking God may be asking you to make. What assumptions and expectations are there that He wants you to let go of?

[21 : 02] What are the things that if you changed if you allowed Him to change them in you those things would bring you closer to Him? We've recognized some tension within the early church this morning particularly as it related to the topic of Gentile believers.

But this issue wasn't totally resolved in case you thought it might be. We'll see some of it come up again in the weeks ahead as we continue the series in Acts.

And it was an important issue that was addressed and you may recognize this as well addressed by the Apostle Paul in several letters that he wrote to various early churches.

But my friends those of us who are Gentile believers today can be thankful that God in His grace has made it clear that all people can be saved by the grace extended through the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Amen.