

Acts 10:9-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-10/acts-109-16/>

Peter Sees a Vision of Unclean Animals

While Cornelius's servants are arriving at Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his host's house praying. He sees a bizarre vision of unclean animals being lowered down from heaven on a blanket. The voice of the Lord tells him to eat the unclean animals, but Peter refuses to eat anything "unholy." The Lord tells Peter to no longer consider what God Himself has cleansed to be "unholy."

While the Apostle Peter remained in Joppa after resurrecting a believer named Tabitha (through Christ's power), a centurion named Cornelius had received a visit from an angel in the port city of Caesarea, about thirty miles north of Joppa ([see map](#)). Cornelius was a Roman who had begun to believe in the God of Israel, fearing the Lord and giving money to the Jews in need, and praying continuously. His entire household also believed and feared the one true God. The angel who visited Cornelius told him his service to God has been well received, and that he must send some men to find a man named Simon Peter in Joppa and bring him to Caesarea. Cornelius had immediately sent two servants of his household along with a devout soldier on this errand.

Luke, the author of Acts, follows Cornelius's sent men for a moment, then jumps ahead to their destination: *On the next day, as the two servants and soldier of Cornelius were on their way and approaching the city of Joppa, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray* (v. 9). Cornelius's erranders are not far from Joppa. It sounds as though the city was in sight, for they *were on their way and approaching it*, as well as the fact that they find Peter a relatively short time after his vision ends.

The *sixth hour* in the Roman way of telling time is equivalent to mid-day, or twelve o' clock, noon our time. If Cornelius's men had left immediately in the late afternoon of the previous day and walked during the night for a while before resting, they could reasonably have reached Joppa by noon the following day.

Peter went to *the housetop* of Simon the Tanner's house *to pray*, but realized he was *hungry*. Clearly he is not fasting in tandem with his prayer at present. So Peter *became hungry and was desiring to eat*. He seems to have called down from the *housetop* requesting some lunch from his hosts, *but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance* (v. 10).

The word for *trance* is the Greek "ekstasis." It is often translated as "amazed." In this passage it means to have one's normal state of mind temporarily changed, to be taken to a different reality. Often in scripture, moments where men or women see the supernatural, it is described as a vision, as something supernatural making itself apparent to the human eye, such as in the previous section where Cornelius saw an angel enter the room.

Here, Peter is entirely displaced. This experience is also called a "vision" in verse 17, something supernatural that Peter sees. But this *trance* is apparently not something real in the sense that

angels are real, only veiled from our earthly eyesight most of the time. Peter's *trance* is an object lesson from God meant to show him how God thinks, and how God loves. God will make an effort to lead Peter to align his mind and heart to embrace that God loves and values all people, not just Jews.

This object lesson will affect Peter and the spread of the gospel forever. His *trance* stands out as one of the more creatively illustrative moments of divine revelation, in the same vein as the many prophetic visions found in the book of Daniel (Daniel 4:10-12, 7:1-3, 8:5). God is going to teach Peter something by means of an extraordinary visual aid, using animals as an illustration. Animals seem to be a favorite material for God's use in visions, given how frequently they appear in the dreams He gives throughout the Bible:

Peter saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air (v. 11-12).

As Peter sits on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner, whose house was located on the Mediterranean Sea, he was hungry for lunch. The appearance of a *great sheet* brings to the modern mind a giant picnic blanket. It is slowly *lowered* to the *ground*. The contents of the *sheet* are revealed to Peter. He sees emerging from within the blanket *all kinds of animals*.

We know from Peter's reaction in v. 14 that these animals are *unclean* according to the Jewish dietary law (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14). Luke does not specify the animals, only describing them as *four-footed animals, crawling creatures of the earth, and birds of the air*. The *four-footed animals* could have included any creature that did not have cloven hooves and did not chew its cud, and was therefore unclean (Leviticus 11:3).

Cows, sheep, deer, and goats were "kosher" (Hebrew, "fit, clean, acceptable") according to Jewish law, but just about everything else was not permitted to be eaten (from camels and pigs, which do not chew their cud, to anything that is not hooved, whether a lion or a monkey or a mouse).

The forbidden *birds of the air* included eagles, falcons, kites, owls, herons, and more (Leviticus 11:13-19)

The Greek word translated as *crawling creatures* is "herpeton," most often translated elsewhere as "snakes." The field of herpetology is the study of reptiles and amphibians. "Herpo" means simply "to creep," so it can include all animals that creep and crawl along the ground. Likewise, the Levitical law forbids the consumption of "swarming things," things which "teem" or "crawl," including in this category moles as well as lizards (Leviticus 11:29-30).

So Peter, in this *trance, hungry and desiring to eat*, sees a blanket unfold that reveals countless animals he is forbidden to eat.

But suddenly he is commanded to do just that, *A voice*, seemingly the voice of God, *came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!"* (v. 13)

But Peter, a devout Jew, said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean" (v. 14). He has never broken the dietary Law, and does not plan to do so now. It is unthinkable to him to eat a pig, or a vulture, or a rat. We know that Peter was a man of determination, and here he illustrates his insistence to keep God's law; he would (reasonably) expect God to approve.

The Law catalogued the different animals that the Jewish people were not allowed to eat because the Jews were to be set apart and holy; they were to be a good example to other nations, to show them a better way to live (Exodus 19:6). The meaning of the word "holy" is to be set apart in a special way, to be uncommon.

The Jews were called by God to be a holy, other, separate group of people from the other nations of the earth. Instead of following the pagan ways of exploitation and violence, the Jews were called to love their neighbors and seek the best interest of others. Their dietary restriction was one of many ways God told them to distinguish themselves.

Long before God gave the law to Moses, He told Noah and his sons to consume whatever animal or plant they wished to eat,

"Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant."
(Genesis 9:3)

This implies that prior to the flood, humans only ate plants. Since the earth at that time was destroyed (2 Peter 3:6) it would seem that God needed to expand the human diet in order for them to gain sufficient nutrients. In order to protect the animal population, God put the fear of humans into them (Genesis 9:2).

When it came to His own chosen people, God gave a strict ordinance of what was permitted to eat and what wasn't. In this *trance*, Peter is struggling between what God is telling him now, and what God had commanded the Israelites since their founding covenant which they entered over a thousand years before (Exodus 19:8). This new command within this dream-*trance* violates everything Peter has ever been taught about food.

It is possible Peter thinks he is being tested. He has examples from the Old Testament and the intertestamental period about the heroism of Jews who refused to eat unclean food. Daniel (Daniel 1:8), where he refuses to eat the king's food, and God blesses him as a result of that. During the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (the prototype of the antichrist/the desolator, Daniel 9:27), Antiochus tried to compel the Jews to eat pig's flesh in an attempt to eradicate Judaism.

This, among other abominations, resulted in the Jewish revolt led by the priest Judah Maccabees, securing a century of Jewish independence. This was a little less than 200 years before Peter's lifetime, and was viewed as a triumph of Jews who were faithful to the Law. Judas Maccabees and his followers would rather have died than eat pork, among other defilements, because they believed that it was what God asked them to do.

Eating “kosher” food was a way to show one’s devotion and love for God. Peter’s hesitation is understandable. As a devout Jew his whole life, his response to the command to eat of all creatures is, “I have never done this, and I’m never going to do it.”

The *voice* from Heaven presses him: *Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”* (v. 15) The *voice*, which comes from *God* tries to explain the purpose of this *trance* experience. Peter, as a pious Jew, views all animals outside of the Law’s permission as *unholy and unclean*. God, who gave the Law, is telling Peter that He has *cleansed* these creatures so that Peter should *no longer consider* them *unholy*.

It is implied that Peter refuses a second time. *This exchange happened three times*. God commands it, Peter refuses.

After the third refusal, *immediately the object* (the sheet full of pigs, serpents, eagles, etc.) *was taken up into the sky* (v. 16).

Peter will puzzle over the meaning of this trance in the following passages. He will come to realize the illustration was not really about animals. Rather, it was about people. God does not so much care about animals, or whether or not to eat them. God cares about the heart. And here God is telling Peter, and all other believing Jews, that His salvation is extended to the world beyond Israel, to all Gentiles who would believe.

This was consistent with scripture. From the very beginning, God had promised that through Abraham all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). But now there is a new era dawning; Peter should no longer *consider* the Gentiles as *unholy*, for God’s will is for all people to be *cleansed* of their sin. God desires to bridge the gap, and through faith in Jesus end all separation from Him (Psalm 67:2, 1 Timothy 2:4).

In just a few chapters, Peter will testify that it was through him that God first opened the way to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7). He will also proclaim, regarding Gentiles, “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (Acts 15:11).

In detailing the fact that it was through His chief apostle, Peter, that Jesus opened the way to the Gentiles, Luke is documenting a basis for his fellow minister Paul’s authority as an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13). He also documents that Peter endorsed the fact that all peoples are saved the same way: through God’s grace.

Biblical Text

⁹ On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” ¹⁵

Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.