

# Acts 11:11-18

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*Peter's Defense to the Skeptical Jews continues: The Spirit Fell on the Gentiles*  
*After Peter's vision in Joppa, three men sent from Caesarea arrived at his location. Commanded by the Holy Spirit, Peter went with them to meet the centurion Cornelius who had been instructed by an angel to seek Peter. Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius, his friends, and his family—Gentiles all. The Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles as they believe in Jesus. After hearing this account, the Jerusalem believers realize that God had granted Gentiles the opportunity to be saved from sin to eternal life.*

Peter continues to relate his experience in Joppa and Caesarea to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who are critical of his visit to Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Peter is being confronted by fellow Jews for what they perceive as being a violation of Jewish law, and therefore an overt sin before God.

What followed the vision of the animals being lowered from the sky is relatively simple. Peter awoke from his trance. Peter recounts that now out of the trance and back in the physical world, *behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea* (v. 11).

These three men were two servants and a soldier sent by the Roman centurion Cornelius to find Peter (Acts 10:7-8). Separate to Peter's vision, Cornelius himself had experienced an angelic visitation, where God told Cornelius to send for a man called Simon Peter in Joppa.

The timing—right after his vision—underscores the divine orchestration of these events.

*The Spirit told Peter to go with them without misgivings* (v. 12). Peter does not say whether the voice was audible. But the subsequent details remove any doubt.

Peter emphasizes his obedience to the Holy Spirit, which adds divine authority to his actions. Peter did this because God told him to. This was God's will. It also suggests that Peter might have had reservations, *misgivings*, since the Spirit specifically said for him to go *without misgivings*. That Peter would have *misgivings* would be expected, given that Cornelius was a Gentile. But the Spirit's instruction was clear.

Peter points to the men who accompanied him to Caesarea: *These six brethren also went with me* (v. 12). Six believing Jews traveled with the Apostle to visit the Gentiles. They can attest to what Peter is saying. They also were surprised that God was calling them to minister to non-Jews. Jewish law required two or three witnesses. Peter has more than an abundance, having six. That Luke records Peter's story twice in full detail, in this case citing multiple witnesses, shows the importance of this account.

In the Jerusalem Council, Luke will again record Peter's testimony regarding this event, where he says:

“After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.’”  
(Acts 15:7)

This affirms that a primary purpose for Luke in writing Acts is to document that it was through Peter that the gospel first came to the Gentiles, and that the Holy Spirit came upon them without any need for them to be circumcised or otherwise conform to Jewish religious tradition. This documentation by Luke, Paul’s ministry partner, provides powerful support to Paul’s gospel message of grace, and his authority as an apostle appointed to preach the gospel of grace to the Gentiles.

Peter continues recounting his story to the skeptical Jews in Jerusalem. After they *entered the man’s house* in Caesarea, Cornelius *reported to them how he had seen the angel standing in his house*. This is what the angel told him:

*‘Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household’* (vs. 13-14).

From an earthly perspective, based on the mindset of the Jews and Gentiles of this time, this meeting should never have happened. The culture of each held that they should each be offended by the other.

And the meeting never would have happened, had God not given Peter the vision of the unclean animals, and had the Holy Spirit not directed him to Caesarea. In two separate instances, God the Spirit told Cornelius to seek Peter and simultaneously told Peter to go with the men who sought him.

Both Cornelius and Peter obeyed perfectly. Peter did not flee from Joppa, as Jonah had (Jonah 1:3). Cornelius did not dismiss the vision. He was described as a worshipper of God already, who treated the Jews with respect and charity (Acts 10:1-2). He desired to learn the *words* (the message) *by which* he and his *household could be saved* from sin and death.

This meeting was God’s will, and it defied the expectations of men. Humans are tribal by nature, but in the eyes of God, we are one race, and He desires to be reconciled to us all (Romans 5:10, Galatians 3:27-28; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Because both men obeyed, the gospel came to the Gentiles. God’s grace had spread to Gentiles throughout scripture to this point. Some examples are Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10), and Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (Daniel 3:29). But now begins an elevated fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that in him all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Through Jesus, son of Abraham, all the nations can be reconciled to God through faith.

Peter, upon learning that the reason the Spirit led him to a Gentile’s house was to *speak words* of salvation—the gospel—obeys without hesitation. The vision of the unclean animals now made clean by God probably returned to his mind, and this time he would not refuse them. As he told his Gentile hosts, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:34). God’s love applies to all peoples of the earth (John 3:16).

So here in Acts 11, Peter tells the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that he began to preach the good news of Jesus Christ: *as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles just as He did upon us at the beginning* (v. 15). By *the beginning* Peter is referring to the moment when the Holy Spirit fell upon them when they were gathered in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

This is the final confirmation that Gentiles are welcomed into God's plan. Through Jesus, God is saving people from sin and death through faith. Peter shrewdly draws a parallel between the outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles with the day of Pentecost (*the beginning*) when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and disciples (Acts 2:1-4). The Gentiles began praising God in multiple languages, just as at Pentecost (Acts 10:46). These believing Jews had received the Spirit of God. Now Gentiles were receiving the same Spirit. There can be no conclusion other than that God had now fully accepted these Gentiles into His family as His children.

Peter remarks on what came to his mind upon seeing *the Holy Spirit* fall upon the Gentiles the same way He had fallen on the Jewish believers: *I remembered the word of the Lord Jesus, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'* (v. 16). Peter cites Jesus's words just before He ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:5) regarding the baptism of the Spirit, emphasizing the equality of the Gentile believers' experience to that of the early Jewish believers.

Again, what mattered was not religious rituals, such as to be *baptized with water* (which is good, but does not save), rather it is to *be baptized with the Holy Spirit*, to be immersed or filled with Him, born anew by God into right standing with God (John 3:3, 6).

The word *baptism* is a transliteration of the Greek word "baptizo" which means to be "immersed," "submerged," or "overwhelmed." When anyone believes in Jesus Christ as their Savior, they are immersed into the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell within them.

Setting aside all former expectations and misguided understandings, Peter concludes rightly: *Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?* (v. 17).

This shows great spiritual growth in Peter. Not too many years prior, Peter had taken Jesus aside and rebuked Him for saying He was to suffer and die. Jesus stated to Peter:

"Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."  
(Matthew 16:23)

This shows that Peter's disposition was, in fact, to stand in God's way. But several things had transpired. Peter had denied Christ and learned a bitter lesson (Matthew 26:75). Peter had been restored by Jesus (John 21:15-19). And he had been filled with the Holy Spirit, who was now guiding him. He had learned to follow God, rather than thinking he should get God to follow him.

Peter's rhetorical question *who was I that I could stand in God's way?* challenges the Jewish believers. He argues that if God has accepted the Gentiles, who is he, or anyone else, to disagree? How *could Peter stand in God's way?* He can't.

No one has the authority to correct God. No one can stop His will. The only reasonable conclusion is that the Gentiles who heard the word and believed are fully accepted by God. That means that they have right standing with God through Jesus. This is now indisputable, because of the evidence—*God gave to them the same gift of the Holy Spirit as He gave to the Jews also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Gentile's faith in Jesus resulted in the same *gift* of the Holy Spirit as the Jews had experienced. The gift of the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles immediately upon them believing the word that was preached. This is God's work, His will, His *way*. He granted His Spirit to be given to those who believed, even though they were Gentile.

Nothing can thwart God. His will is what is done. Nothing stops that. So rather than *stand in God's way*, Peter decided to submit to it. He let go of his former misconceptions about who could be justified in God's sight. He followed God's will and welcomed the Gentiles into the fold, calling for the Gentiles to be baptized as a symbolic expression of their new life:

“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”  
(Acts 10:47)

Peter has given to the skeptical Jews in Jerusalem an account in great detail and “orderly sequence,” telling them his vision and purpose in going to the Roman Gentiles in Caesarea (v. 4). He has made his defense against the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (v. 3).

The Jewish believers respond to Peter's story with surprise, but acceptance, even gladness:

*When they heard this, they quieted down* (v. 18).

The phrase *they quieted down* implies that when they first greeted Peter it was with some intensity, umbrage, volume, offense. They were displeased that Peter associated with the Gentiles, eating with them and fellowshiping with the Roman oppressors, enemies of God's chosen people. Worse, through Peter they had “received the word of God” (v. 1). Their initial greeting was reminiscent of Jonah, who initially refused to bring God's word to Israel's Assyrian enemy. This comparison is particularly appropriate since Joppa was the seaport from which Jonah embarked to disobey (Jonah 1:3), and also the place where Peter had the vision and calling to bring God's word to Roman Gentiles, and from there he embarked to obey.

But *When they* (the skeptical Jews) *heard* Peter's account, that God had sent both the Gentile Cornelius and Peter a vision, and that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, the accusers *quieted down*. Who were they *that they could stand in God's way?* Their response was to let go of their preconceived notions, their prejudices, and to praise the Lord.

They *glorified God* for extending salvation to the Gentiles, remarking with some residual shock, “*Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life*” (v. 18). Salvation is God’s business. God redeemed the Gentiles by His grace, simply because they believed. God’s grace cannot be contained or portioned through the preferences of men. He *has granted to the Gentiles also* this saving from death and sin. *God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.*

The phrase *God has granted* indicates God’s favor or grace. Most of the time the word translated *granted* is rendered as “given.” God has given to the Gentiles a great gift. This gift is the *repentance that leads to life*. These Jewish believers do not seem to be thinking about heaven versus hell, as is typical of Gentiles. They appear to be more focused on the practical reality of their conversion. God has given them *repentance*. To repent is to turn from one way of thinking and living to another. By the giving of His Spirit, it is clear that God has given the Gentiles a new heart. They now have the ability to see with spiritual eyes, and to know and live what is true.

To know and live what is true leads to the experience of *life*. The word translated *life* is the Greek word “zoe” which refers to the quality and quantity of life experience.

The act of *believing in the Lord Jesus Christ* is the turning away from sin and the world and turning to *Jesus* for our only hope of *life*. The Jews understood that this is abundant life, “everlasting life” (Galatians 6:8).

When we first believe we are born again, *baptized with the Holy Spirit*. The power of the Spirit enables us to live a *life* cleansed from sin and death, a *life* of meaning, purpose, peace, joy. That is the door that is opened to us. However, it remains for us to walk in the Spirit in order to gain the blessing of experiencing life (“zoe”).

The new life of a believer starts with spiritual birth at the point of faith, but it is only the beginning of the spiritual life that we want to live.

This is what Peter preached to the Gentiles—the good news about what Jesus the Messiah accomplished on earth: “through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43). To be cleansed, to be made right in the sight of God, is available to any person who believes in Him.

This is what Jesus told Nicodemus the pharisee when He said,

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”  
(John 3:14-15)

In this passage from John 3, Jesus is referring to the trial in the wilderness where the wandering Israelites were perishing from venomous snake bites. God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and tell everyone that whoever looked upon the snake would not die from the venom. God healed everyone who had sufficient faith in God’s promise to simply look, hoping to be delivered from the venom (Numbers 21:4-9). Similarly, all that is required to receive forgiveness of sins is simply enough faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the poisonous

venom of sin. That is a faith of repentance. That is an expression of a desire to move from death to life.

To be born again spiritually requires that we recognize we are dying from the deadly venom of sin, then to look upon Jesus on the cross, hoping to be delivered from death through the promise of God. To believe in Jesus as the Son of God who died for our sins and was raised up on the third day (1 Peter 1:3). Those who believe are given a new spiritual birth (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

For more on receiving the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus, read our article: [“What is Eternal Life? How to Gain the Gift of Eternal Life.”](#)

This is a monumental realization to the Jews that God’s rescue from sin and death is not only for the Jews but is now offered to all peoples of the earth. Jesus indicated this was the case in His “Great Commission,” but now it is becoming a reality (Matthew 28:18-20).

In the wider story of Acts, this moment marks a significant turn in the early church. The fact that the gospel was given to both Jews and Gentiles is undeniable. Luke, the author of Acts, sets the stage for the ministry of the Apostle Paul, who primarily preached the gospel to the Gentiles. That Peter initially opened the door for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles is important, because it validates Paul’s ministry. These Gentiles received the Holy Spirit without any need to convert to Judaism or be circumcised. And Peter, the lead apostle of Jesus, was the agent through whom God gave this great gift.

Here, Peter’s testimony is a defense against the criticism from the Jews for taking the gospel to the Gentiles without them first converting to Judaism. Luke’s account helps strengthen Paul’s eventual defense against similar Jewish critics who are trying to compete against Paul. We see this conflict between Paul and competing Jewish “authorities” in the books of Romans and Galatians, to name a couple of examples.

While these Jews who hear Peter’s defense respond by quieting down and glorifying God, there will be many Jews who try to convolute the gospel of grace, seeking to convert the Gentiles into becoming Jews—getting circumcised, putting themselves under the Mosaic Law, living by the Law. Paul’s ministry will emphasize to the Gentiles that true righteousness (living in harmony with God’s design for us) comes by faith, not by following religious rules (Romans 9:30-32). Paul will emphasize to the Gentiles to walk by faith, following the leading of the Holy Spirit rather than walking under religious laws (Galatians 5:16-18) .

Paul, like Peter in this passage, preached the gospel of grace in his ministry. The gospel of grace holds that what matters is believing. Anyone who believes is baptized spiritually by the Holy Spirit, as the Gentiles in Caesarea experienced. Faith in Jesus is what places us into God’s family, not getting dunked in water or being circumcised or following certain religious rules.

It is a spiritual transformation (*repentance*) that leads us to *life*. Much of the remainder of the New Testament is a contest and conflict between Paul and people who try to counter Paul’s teaching of Grace. Luke is Paul’s ministry companion. We will see Luke join Paul on some of his missionary journeys later in Acts (Acts 16:11).

By recording this story, Luke is creating a powerful support for Paul's authority and ministry. He is putting up this defense for Paul saying, "Look, from the mouth of Peter, what God has made clean, do not call common." The baptism of the Spirit places people into God's family. There is no need for them to also be conformed to Jewish religious custom. This filling and immersion/baptism of God's Spirit is God's gift to those who believe.

For Jews in Acts, they had to be baptized in order to receive the Holy Spirit, or received it through the laying on of hands. But for the Gentiles, they received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit immediately upon belief, as in this story of Peter and Cornelius. For the Jews, their repentance was to be set apart from the perverse generation that rejected Jesus (Acts 2:40-41). For the Gentiles, their repentance was to be delivered from the penalty of sin, and placed into Christ through His Spirit (Acts 10:43-44). This is a repentance, or change of mind, that leads to these Gentiles receiving the free gift of eternal life (John 3:14-15). The fact that these Gentiles have a new spiritual power also gives them the ability to renew their minds, and be conformed to the image of Christ, which will lead them to be able to experience eternal life (Romans 12:1-2).

So, importantly, Luke records the response of the Jews in Jerusalem who criticized Peter for associating with the uncircumcised Gentiles. Upon hearing that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit, the Jews glorified God. That is the model for how other Jews should react to Gentiles coming to faith, rather than to try to add the Mosaic Law to God's grace (Galatians 2:21, 5:18, Romans 6:14).

### **Biblical Text**

**11 And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. 13 And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."**