

Acts 11:4-10

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Peter's Defense: The Vision

Peter teaches his critics in detail of the vision he had in Joppa. During a trance, he saw a large sheet descending from the sky, filled with various unclean animals according to the Mosaic Law. A voice from Heaven instructed him to eat these animals, but Peter refused, attesting that he had never eaten anything unholy or unclean. The voice rebuked Peter that what God has cleansed should not be considered unholy. This conversation repeated two times before the sheet was drawn back into the heavens.

After preaching the gospel to Roman Gentiles in Caesarea, Peter has returned to Jerusalem. The Jewish believers there confront him with what they perceive as being a sinful deed. They have heard that he associated with Gentiles and ate food with them, something forbidden in Jewish society. They challenge his actions, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (v. 3).

Peter now gives his explanation and defense of why he went to the Gentiles. It begins with the vision he had before visiting the Gentiles in Caesarea,

But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence (v. 4):

Peter carefully and systematically explains the events which led to him visiting the Gentiles. He is highlighting the importance of what had happened by recounting the events *in orderly sequence*. He is also trying to be as clear as possible, leading his Jewish brothers along the same journey he went on, because he too formerly thought that associating with the Gentiles was inappropriate and in defiance of God's will.

He was wrong, and God showed him what was right, so now Peter is going to guide these other Jewish believers away from their criticism, their anger, and their prejudice against Gentiles. He will guide them into the truth of God's plan to save all people groups from their sins, not just the Jewish people.

The story begins while he *was in the city of Joppa praying* (v. 5). The location is interesting. *Joppa* (modern-day Jaffa, Israel) is the same place where Jonah tried to flee from God's command to go to Nineveh to preach to unclean Gentiles (Jonah 1:3). Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a superpower at the time that sought to conquer Israel. The parallel to Rome is obvious. Each was a world empire.

In both cases, God was calling one of His messengers (Jonah, Peter) to preach to Israel's oppressor (Assyria, Rome) providing them an opportunity to save themselves from God's judgment. Jonah fled from God's will, and suffered many times over for it, while Peter obeyed, and got to be a part of the incredible induction of Gentiles into God's family as His children. Peter was God's instrument to preach to them salvation through faith in His Son Jesus, the Messiah.

Peter was in *Joppa* after having visited other churches in [Judea](#), performing various miracles of healing and checking in on the general wellbeing of these churches.

Peter continues to recount his experience that explains why he interacted directly with Gentiles. While he was *praying*, perhaps seeking God's will on where he should go next on his circuit, God responded with a bizarre *trance* and *vision* (v. 5), an illustration of the heart-change Peter needed to experience before he could continue preaching the gospel.

Peter reports: *And in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me* (v. 5): That the *great sheet* was *lowered by four corners from the sky* is symbolic of divine revelation and instruction, coming down from above, from Heaven.

Peter was keen to understand the *vision* as it unfolded: *and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air* (v. 6).

These *animals of the earth*—*four-footed, wild beasts, crawling creatures, and birds of the air* represent a comprehensive spectrum of every animal forbidden to be eaten by the Jewish dietary laws. We know this because after the animals are revealed,

Peter *also heard a voice saying to him, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'*

But Peter replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' (v. 7-8).

Based on Peter's response, the animals presented in the *great sheet* were all creatures which were *unclean* and not allowed for consumption based on the laws of Moses (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14).

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 pigs, which do not chew their cud, to horses, which do not have split hooves, to anything that is not hooved, whether a leopard, a dog, or a bear).

The forbidden *birds of the air* included eagles, pelicans, sea gulls, owls, storks, 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"—rodents as well as lizards (Leviticus 11:29-30).

Peter attests he has never broken this law, *nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered his mouth*. He certainly doesn't want to destroy his perfect record now. The concept of holiness in the Bible

means something is “set apart” for a special purpose. The Israelites were God’s “holy people” (Deuteronomy 7:6), set apart by Him, chosen by Him to live according to His standards. They were to have a priestly mission to the Gentiles, to show them a better way to live (Exodus 19:6). Food that was set apart for consumption was “kosher,” and all else was *unholy*, not set apart, outside of the acceptable dietary parameters.

The Jews of the New Testament period viewed other people groups in the same way they viewed unclean animals. The Gentiles were not holy, they were not set apart by God, thus they were *unholy* and *unclean*. This is the mindset Peter had prior to his vision, and this is the mindset of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who have taken “issue with him” (v. 2) for associating with Roman Gentiles in Caesarea.

Despite Peter’s refusal to eat of the unclean animals in his vision, Peter recounts that *a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy’* (v. 9).

This answer cuts to the core of what God is trying to communicate. This is a radical transformation in Peter’s understanding. God is emphasizing the universality of Christ’s gospel. Jesus died for all, and all who believe can be justified in God’s sight and be born into His forever family (John 3:14-15). The point of the *vision* isn’t about food, it is that Jesus died for the entire World, because of His love (John 3:16). Jesus is the king of the Jews, but He died for all, not just the Jews (John 19:21).

Before He went back to Heaven, Jesus Christ commanded Peter and the apostles to preach the gospel to all peoples (Matthew 28:19). The vision told Peter that it was now time for him to do that. God showed Peter that He has *cleansed* the Gentiles so Peter should *no longer consider* them *unholy*. They are not outside of God’s extension of grace. God wants to bring all people out of their sin and be reconciled to them (John 3:16-17, Romans 5:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Even so, Peter refused God’s request for him to eat *three times, and so everything was drawn back up into the sky* (v. 10) and the vision ended.

In the following passage, Peter will continue to tell the skeptical Jews in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit told him directly what to do and where to go, and in obeying, Peter begins to understand the vision.

This vision kickstarted the early church with divine affirmation to reach out to the Gentiles, setting the stage for Paul’s missionary journeys and the spread of faith in Christ throughout the Roman Empire.

Biblical Text

4 But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, 5 “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, 6 and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ 8 But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9 But a voice from heaven

answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' 10 This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.