

The Holy Spirit Came

Acts 11:1-18

John Breon

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had 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 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 a trance 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. 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 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. 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 us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that 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."

The apostle Peter is in Jerusalem explaining to the Jesus followers there what had recently happened. Luke, the writer of Acts, obviously sees this as an important story. He tells it in detail in chapter 10, repeats a good bit of it here in chapter 11, and refers to it again in chapter 15.

The gist of the story is that God has opened the way for Gentiles, non-Jewish people, to repent, be forgiven, and receive the Holy Spirit. The proof for Peter was that the Holy Spirit came—or fell—on a group of Gentiles just as the Spirit had come upon the first followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost. This event is sometimes called “the Gentile Pentecost.”

Let’s go back and hear again this account of the Holy Spirit’s surprising work. Along the way, we’ll see some of what it means for us.

Peter had been on a little mission trip to the Mediterranean coast. He’s staying in the town of Joppa when Cornelius the Centurion sends for him. Cornelius is a Roman, the captain of the Italian Regiment stationed in Caesarea, a coastal city. It seems the influence of Jewish people around him has led him to believe in the One God rather than the many gods that Romans typically worshiped. Cornelius is what’s known as a “God-fearer,” a Gentile who accepted Jewish belief in God and followed some of the Jewish teachings without converting and becoming a Jew.

Cornelius demonstrates his faith by giving generously to those in need and praying to God regularly. One afternoon, he has a vision. He sees one of God’s angels clearly and distinctly. The angel calls him by name. Fearfully, Cornelius asks, “What do you want, sir?”

The angel tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have come before God as a memorial. Then the angel instructs him to send some men to Joppa to bring Simon Peter to Caesarea. Cornelius immediately dispatches two of his servants and a devout soldier who serves under his command.

The next day Peter is waiting for lunch to be prepared and he goes up on the flat roof of the house to pray. He’s hungry and while he prays, he falls into a trance. In this trance Peter has a vision. Heaven is opened and something like a big sheet or tarp is lowered to the earth. Inside the sheet are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat. Peter replies, “Oh, no, Lord! I’ve never even tasted anything profane or

unclean." The sheet obviously contained animals that the Jewish law prohibited eating. But the voice speaks to Peter again: "Don't call anything profane or unholy that God has made clean." For emphasis, this happens three times. Then the vision ends.

While Peter is trying to figure out what this means, the men Cornelius sent show up and call out for Peter. The Holy Spirit tells him to go downstairs and meet these men. "Don't hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them," the Spirit says. The word for *hesitate* there is the same word used in 11:2 when it says some of the believers *criticized* Peter. So Peter was not to criticize or discriminate against these Gentiles who came to get him.

So Peter goes down and asks the men what they want. They tell him that Captain Cornelius has sent for him to come to his house and speak.

Ever since Abraham, and especially since the Exodus, the Jews were chosen and called by God. They were to be God's people, set apart to worship God and to be God's means of blessing all people. In trying to remain distinct from the world around them, they sometimes became exclusive and separatist. By the time of Jesus and the early church, the main things that marked the Jewish people as different were Sabbath-keeping, circumcision, and food laws (eating only "kosher" foods). Most Jews wouldn't go into gentile houses. They wanted to avoid contact with unclean food and other gentile practices that they believed would make them unclean.

But Peter and six others from Joppa set out with Cornelius' men. The following day they arrive in Caesarea. Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends to hear the message this Simon Peter has for them.

When Peter enters the house, Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence. This surely embarrasses Peter, who tells him to get up—"I'm only a man myself," he says. Now Peter the Galilean fisherman and Cornelius the Roman captain chat as they go on inside.

Peter speaks to the group gathered there. He reminds them that it's against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles and visit them like this. "I'm not supposed to be here." But then Peter shares the insight God gave him through the vision on the roof. "God has shown me that I should

not call anyone impure or unclean. No race or ethnic background is better than another. That's why I came here, no questions asked."

Don't we need to be reminded of that in America today? God does not prefer any race or ethnic group. Although he may show favor to those who are abused, downtrodden, or oppressed. Racism, and the bigotry and prejudice that go with it, is a vile sin. We have to let God search our hearts and expose the fear and whatever else it at the root of it. We confess, repent, and ask God to forgive. Then we work to put an end to the ways racism gets expressed in our lives and society.

Peter crossed a boundary he hadn't thought he would. The Jerusalem believers question and criticize him about it. He's convinced that God led him to do it, that God was at work in a new and unexpected way.

Now Peter asks why Cornelius sent for him. Cornelius recounts the story of his vision and the angel's instructions. When Peter retells it in Jerusalem, he mentions that the angel told Cornelius that he would hear a message "through which you and all your household will be saved." Salvation is what God is about here—the salvation of excluded people, outsiders.

Then Cornelius says, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." What a great invitation and attitude! We're in God's presence right now. Do you expect that God will have something to say to you now or when you read the Bible or when we (eventually) worship together?

As Peter begins his message he says an amazing thing. God's been leading him to this insight for some time. "God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do what he says, the door is open" (10:34-35, *The Message*).

Peter tells them about God's message to Israel and the good news of Jesus Christ. They've heard something about it, but he goes over it again. We can't get too much gospel. Peter summarizes Jesus' ministry: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with him" (10:38). The people killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross. The death of Jesus is central to what God was doing in him and

it's central to our witness about him. But God raised him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is central and vital as well. Peter and others were witnesses who saw Jesus and ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. God has appointed Jesus as judge of the living and the dead. Peter supports his message by appealing to the prophets who say that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Peter doesn't even finish that sentence when the Holy Spirit comes or falls upon all who are listening. Cornelius and his household suddenly and unexpectedly receive the Holy Spirit and start praising God in languages they haven't learned.

Peter and the believing Jews with him are stunned. The gift of the Holy Spirit is being poured out on these "outsiders" who've done nothing but invite Peter and listen to him. The proof of Peter's new insight is on display right in front of him.

Peter says, "What's to keep these people from being baptized with water? They've received the Holy Spirit just as we did." When he recounts the event for the Jerusalem believers, he says, "The Holy Spirit came or fell on them just as on us at the beginning." This group of Gentiles had the same experience of the Holy Spirit that the first disciples had earlier. Peter draws the conclusion: "So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could hinder God or stand in God's way?"

This account convinced the Jerusalem believers—a good number of them, at least—that God has given even Gentiles repentance that leads to life. The invitation since Pentecost has been to repent, believe, be forgiven, and receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit. But now, instead of being offered exclusively to Jews or Gentiles who first become Jews, the invitation is offered to all people without discrimination.

What a tremendous story. God directs the action. Peter and Cornelius are almost carried along in the stream of God's purpose. The church came to a turning point where insiders were willing to include outsiders. This didn't happen because of the church's own genius and ability but because God was at work through the Holy Spirit. The church wouldn't have gone this way on their own. Of course, Peter and the others chose to obey God.

God still calls the church and leads the church and enables the church to go to and reach and receive outsiders. The Spirit of God is still breaking down walls between races and other groups we try to separate. Will we choose to obey God?

Peter was convinced by God through a vision and other experiences. He went where God sent him when God sent him. He preached salvation and forgiveness to Gentiles, foreigners. And he rejoiced when they put their faith in Jesus and experienced salvation. Peter followed God's lead in including those new people in the community of faith. And he convinced other believers to include the new people as well.

The point isn't that Cornelius and other Gentiles are automatically "in." Like the earlier Jewish believers, Gentiles still have to repent and believe in Jesus. But Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to become Christians. It's not that God simply accepts us as we are. God *invites* us as we are. But responding to that invitation always involves transformation of our lives. That transformation is acted out in repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit (N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone* Part 1).

On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate that the Holy Spirit came upon the first followers of Jesus and launched them on mission into the world. We celebrate that the Holy Spirit came upon Samaritans (Acts 8), God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 10-11), and other Gentiles (Acts 19).

Can we celebrate that the Holy Spirit has come upon us? Have we repented, put our faith in Jesus, received God's forgiveness, and received God's gift of the Holy Spirit?

When it says the Holy Spirit came upon them (11:15), the New Testament Greek word is "fell." The Spirit fell upon them as on us as the beginning. Carolyn Moore, in the study *Encounter the Spirit*, points out that the same word is used in the story of the loving father and the prodigal son. After wrecking his life, the son stumbles home, expecting to be made a slave in his father's household. "Instead, his father, seeing the son walking toward home, goes running from the house to meet him. The story says he *fell on* his neck, embracing him and all his brokenness in this wild, lavish, loving bear-hug of acceptance."

Moore goes on:

And there was Peter, in a houseful of people who always felt as if they didn't measure up. And to *those* people, the Holy Spirit came running and *fell on* them, embracing them and all their brokenness in this wild, lavish, loving bear-hug of acceptance. (143-44)

Can we think about the Holy Spirit falling on us that way? What if being filled with the Holy Spirit is the picture of an intimate relationship with our heavenly Abba, Father?

When we know God accepts us like that, we're free to accept each other and to accept people who are different from us. The Holy Spirit equips and empowers us to go to all kinds of people with good news and the invitation to repentance and forgiveness and new life with God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.