

International Bible Lessons Commentary
Acts 11:1-18

New American Standard Bible

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, October 25, 2015

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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, October 25, 2015**, is from **Acts 11:1-18**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the **International Bible Lessons Commentary** website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the **International Bible Lesson Forum**.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Acts 11:1-18

(Acts 11:1) Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Before Peter could return to Jerusalem, the news traveled to the apostles and those in the first Church that those who were not Jews and those who had not first converted to Judaism had accepted the word of God that Jesus and the apostles preached: the good news about Jesus' coming and His death and resurrection and His sending the Holy Spirit into believers in Him. The news spread throughout Judea, while Peter stayed teaching new believers in Caesarea before returning to Jerusalem.

(Acts 11:2) And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,

The Jews always traveled "up to Jerusalem" no matter where they were traveling from, because Jerusalem was the City of David and the location of the Temple. It was the seat of both the political and religious authorities for the Jews. The circumcised Christian believers included those who were Jews from birth (the males who were circumcised on the eighth day) and those who had converted to Judaism (the males who had submitted to circumcision as the sign of fulfilling the Old Covenant ceremonial laws). These Jews who had become Christians criticized Peter for not requiring Cornelius and the other males in his household to first be circumcised into Judaism before becoming Christians in the Church.

(Acts 11:3) saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Both Jews and Christians had been set aside or apart by God for holy service to God. The circumcision party in the first Church did not believe a Christian could be of holy service to God if he broke the ceremonial laws of the Old Covenant, ate forbidden or unclean foods according to the Old Covenant, or went into the house of a Gentile or ate food with a Gentile who had not first converted to Judaism. The New Covenant ratified by the shed blood of God’s Son, Jesus, made those old barriers obsolete and opened the door to sharing the gospel with everyone.

(Acts 11:4) But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,

The story of Peter and Cornelius was of vital importance to the Church and what the Holy Spirit did through Peter and Cornelius prevented Christianity from becoming just another branch of Judaism along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Dead Sea community (the Essenes). Peter had to explain step-by-step from the beginning this new work of God, which could be verified by the six believing witnesses who went with him to the house of Cornelius.

(Acts 11:5) “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,

Peter was in Joppa waiting for his noonday meal and praying. Peter had his vision as God's response to his prayers, and Cornelius met the angel of God in response to his prayers (all according to God's perfect timing and work of the Holy Spirit). The consistent praying and time of praying of these two believers in God prepared them to receive a message from God that would transform the Church for centuries.

(Acts 11:6) 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.

Peter saw a vision because God put him in a trance. We can imagine a huge banquet tablecloth descending from heaven that held both domestic and wild animals, and reptiles and birds both clean and unclean or permitted and not permitted to eat under Old Covenant ceremonial laws.

(Acts 11:7) "I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

When the voice from heaven spoke to Peter, the voice revealed a new condition or provision made possible by the New Covenant. Foods that had once been forbidden and that had separated people were now permitted for everyone to eat. Christians were now filled or indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and as they followed the Holy Spirit they could share the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone without becoming unclean on the basis of what foods they put into their mouths. Jesus had taught: "What goes into

someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them" (Matthew 15:11). And Mark, a companion of Peter, recorded these words of Jesus regarding the food we eat: "For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)" (Mark 7:19).

(Acts 11:8) "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

Peter initially objected to what he was told when he first heard Jesus speak to him, for he recognized the Lord's voice, having served under His public ministry on earth. What Jesus told him to do was beyond his comprehension and a life of indoctrination and practice (he had forgotten what Jesus had taught about food). His immediate response was to make sure he had heard correctly and to beg for leniency or an exemption or permission not to violate the terms of the Old Covenant and his conscience.

(Acts 11:9) "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.'

The Lord's New Covenant is greater than the Old Covenant, and Jesus Christ is Lord over our conscience. Peter was commanded not to call anything impure that God has made clean under the New Covenant. Gentiles and pagans would be made clean when they came to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and they should never

be called ritually unclean or impure. The voice spoke from heaven three times. Peter had not mistaken the command of Jesus. Peter would not be excused from changing his food habits in the days ahead. Peter must change his ideas and practices. From that day forward he was to eat with Gentiles and not allow food restrictions to keep him from talking to them and teaching them about Jesus.

(Acts 11:10) “This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

God wanted to convince Peter and all who would hear about Peter’s vision that Peter was not mistaken. God indeed wanted new terms in the New Covenant so the good news of Jesus could more easily spread to unbelievers and to those all around the world who earnestly sought to know or know more about the true God. The Lord was indeed the Lord over all and not just of one race of people.

(Acts 11:11) “And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

With perfect timing three men formerly considered unclean or ritually impure by Peter came to the home of Simon the tanner, who would also have been considered ritually unclean under the Old Covenant because he handled dead animals. God wanted Peter to see the vision three times and then be met by three Gentiles to further convince Peter that his vision had been from the true God with perfect timing.

(Acts 11:12) “The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.

Peter did not rely on his three visions and the perfect timing of his three visitors alone. The Holy Spirit confirmed for him that God wanted him to teach in the home of Cornelius. Six other Jewish Christians, who probably agreed that Peter’s three visions were from God, and his three visitors who were sent (by God) and Cornelius went with Peter – no doubt the Holy Spirit within the six witnesses led them to believe Peter, obey God, and go to the home of Cornelius with Peter.

(Acts 11:13) “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;

Luke repeated a second time the facts behind Peter’s meeting with Cornelius and his family, because the meeting was so crucial for the Church’s future mission work. God’s love for and providential care for Cornelius and others like him made possible the perfect timing of all these events to confirm for Peter and all who heard the story that God indeed wanted His people to conform their lives to the terms of the New Covenant. Later, Paul would fight the circumcision party often on the basis of the New Covenant established by Jesus Christ so he could lead believing Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ.

(Acts 11:14) and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

At this point in Luke's account, we learn that Cornelius knew he was not saved in spite of his prayers to the true God and his giving to help the poor. He knew that he needed what Jesus came to give: salvation from his sins – not only the eternal consequences for having sinned, but salvation from slavery to and repeating sins. Jesus would do both for him and his family when they believed the good news of Jesus' saving grace.

(Acts 11:15) "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

As they listened, they believed every word they heard Peter say. They knew he was God's messenger and what he preached was true. If they had asked Peter what they could do to be saved, Peter probably would have included circumcision in the terms of fulfilling both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant; therefore, the Holy Spirit came upon them as Peter spoke just as He came upon the believing Jews on the Day of Pentecost. Therefore Peter knew they believed and were saved even though they had not become Jewish converts first.

(Acts 11:16) "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.'

The Holy Spirit within Peter reminded Peter of the teachings of Jesus, which superseded the terms of the Old Covenant. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, converts to Judaism were circumcised and baptized. John said believing Jews needed to repent and be baptized in preparation for the Lord's coming. Jesus Christ the Lord came and He baptized with the Holy Spirit. The Church called everyone to repent and be baptized with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then they would receive the Holy Spirit. After Cornelius and his household had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift directly from Jesus before they were baptized with water, Peter baptized them with water in obedience to Jesus' command.

(Acts 11:17) “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?”

Jesus saw into the hearts and minds of Cornelius and his family and friends. Jesus saw what Peter could not see. They had repented and believed the gospel; therefore, Jesus baptized them in the Holy Spirit. When they received the Holy Spirit, Jesus showed visibly the terms of and the results of the New Covenant in His blood for all who believed in Him. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the six witnesses wisely chose not to stand in the way of God.

(Acts 11:18) 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.”

Peter and the six witnesses convinced the apostles and other believers that Jesus Christ had begun a new work among the Gentiles. During His lifetime of visible ministry on earth, Jesus had welcomed Gentiles and had praised their faith. Jesus wanted the Church to do the same as He did and lead many Gentiles and Jews to saving faith in Him. This did not solve all of the problems in the Church, for many Jews continued to oppose the work of the Church and many would follow Paul and try to discredit him and his work because he did not circumcise all those who accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Give at least two possible reasons why the news about Peter and Cornelius traveled so fast to Jerusalem.
2. Why was Peter criticized for welcoming Cornelius and his household into the Church and baptizing them?
3. Why did God make previously unclean foods clean?
4. Why do you think Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote so much about Peter and his meeting with Cornelius?

5. What did the Spirit say to Peter and why was this message of the Spirit to Peter so important?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly
International Bible Lesson.

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