

## **Acts 11:1-18**

Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’” But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”\*

## **Christ for All** - May 15, 2022

### *Acts 11:1-18*

I think only Peter could get into an argument with God. We know Peter of old. One of Jesus' first disciples, one of the "inner circle" that accompanied Jesus to Mount of Transfiguration. One of the first to confess Jesus as Lord. And, of course, the one who denied him three times during Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Jesus chose Peter to be a leader in the early church possibly because Peter was so impulsive and tended to act before he thought. Perhaps Jesus thought the church needed someone who acted more on intuition and less on reflection. Peter always did blurt out whatever was on his mind, whether for better or worse.

So it shouldn't be so surprising that Peter gets into an argument with God.

Here is the scene: Peter was on the road in the city of Joppa when he has a most extraordinary encounter -- a totally life-changing encounter. Peter has a dream, and not an ordinary dream at that. Peter's dream struck at the core of his identity as a Jew.

Remember that part of understanding all Bible passages is to recall that they were written at a specific time, in a specific place, featuring people familiar with their own time and culture. When we read scripture 2000 years later, we cannot just assume that the way we think about our culture, our values, our situation in life directly applies to theirs. Many of the things we take for granted in our society would have simply been unthinkable in Peter's time. Simple things, like the right to vote, the right speak freely, attempts to insure equal rights regardless of race, nationality, or gender -- all this was unheard of back then.

So let's examine Peter's situation a bit more. Peter was a follower of Jesus, but at the same time Peter was a Jewish male, a resident of Israel. He was part of a tradition that stretched back for centuries. He was part of a heritage that embraced the unique idea that there was one and only one God and that this God had chosen Israel and Israel alone to be God's people -- God's model -- for how the rest of humanity was supposed to live.

The Jewish people had literally hundreds of written laws and even more traditions and customs that had been passed down. Both the written laws and unwritten traditions had a common thread: they all served to define the Jews for who they thought they were, God's chosen people. All the laws worked to remind the Jews that they were different from other human beings. They followed a different pathway.

An excellent book on how the Jews stood out from the world is called, "The Gifts of the Jews," by Thomas Cahill. Cahill explains how many of the values "Western" Civilization takes for granted were originally found in Jewish Law.

Now all this history lesson is intended to help us understand why Peter got into an argument with God. Jewish Law from the time of Moses was very specific about specifying the foods people could eat. Food was either impure or pure. We have a name for food permissible for Jews to eat. The word is Kosher. Peter kept Kosher just as millions of Jews do today. Keeping Kosher was an essential part of his self-identity. More than that, it was an essential part of his faith and his nationality.

So I think for a moment, Peter's understanding of himself, his faith, and his nation got in the way of God's instruction that anything God made for human consumption was now clean and Kosher. Peter is the master of knee-jerk reactions. We see them all the time in scripture. It didn't matter that God now declared all foods Kosher, Peter had the ancient mind-set of his people and automatically, vehemently, reverted to his lifelong understanding of what was and was not permissible. I would imagine after second thought (which Peter had to do quite often) he probably realized that he had dared argue with God! No doubt Peter felt very guilty when he realized what he had done.

Nonetheless, the fact that Peter argued with God should actually resonate well with us today. I know that when we hear or read the scripture that starts with, "By no means, Lord," we might raise our eyebrows quite high! But are we any different from Peter?

What is a human being, really? It sometimes amuses and sometimes infuriates me when so-called "experts" say that, "all blacks agree" or "the LGBTQ community says," or "Muslims say" or "Women are supportive." What nonsense! Every human being is a complex mixture of biology, nationality, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and so many other factors. Believe it or not, there are Queer Republicans. Believe it or not, there are Jews who believe Jesus is the Messiah, but don't call themselves Christians. There are people of Russian decent who love Lenin, but hate Putin. I can go on and on. But the point is there is no such thing as saying, "All (blank) believe (blank)." Every human being is a unique and special mixture of so many characteristics that we can't ever say the word "all" in the context of one very small subdivision of what constitutes of ideas and belief system.

This was the first and biggest question facing the early church and a question that faces us even today. How do we define a follower of Jesus Christ?

For Peter, at least initially, he defined the legitimate followers of Jesus as first being devout, Jewish, Israelites living in or near the Promised Land. That is what he originally understand Jesus to be

about. For Peter, Jesus was the Messiah promised in the scriptures of what Christians call the Old Testament. Jesus was the descendant of David who would fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and others. Even today, the fundamental difference between Jews and Christians is whether Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah or not. For Christians, Jesus is. For Jews, Jesus is a great prophet, but he is not the one they are looking for.

Obviously, Peter decided Jesus is the one. But what exactly did a person have to do in order to be a follower of Jesus?

Initially, Peter thought, as did many of the Jesus-followers in Israel, that to follow Jesus meant first and foremost, to become Jewish and embrace the Laws of Moses as their own. That meant, painfully, that non-Jewish men would have to be circumcised. More importantly, that would mean that all people, whether Jewish or not, would have to decide to follow all the Jewish Laws dating from the time of Moses, whether or not they had been part of their tradition.

Wow! That is a hard thing, isn't it? The Laws of Moses were at least 1500 years old when Jesus was alive. Moreover, they were designed for and pertained to a particular group of people. Imagine telling a "newbie" to Jesus that they had to subscribe to a code of laws and follow the teachings of someone who predated them by hundreds of years? Their first question, indeed, my first question would be why? Why do I have to follow the customs of those people in order to worship Jesus as my Lord and Savior? What is so important about those traditions of so long ago? Are they really important for me?

Friends, in Peter's dream, the answer from God was clearly, "No!" It is clear as God explained to Peter that God created the Laws for the Jews precisely to help them differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. In choosing the Jews, God deliberately want to segregate a certain group to be an example to the world. In what we call the Old Testament, God laid out a plan for how human beings ought to live, a plan that was and still is very different from how most humans live today.

Friends, I praise our Jewish sisters and brothers. The Laws of Moses still offer the best way to live a human life of peace, dignity, and respect. Jesus himself said that he came to this world not to abolish the Law of Moses, but to fulfill it. That means that Jesus respected the intent behind the Laws which was based on granting all human beings fundamental access to respect, equality, and most importantly, dignity and love. The Laws of Moses were designed as a list of ways we should treat each other and if we really did treat each other the way God revealed in the Ten Commandments, what an amazing world we would be living in!

Jesus therefore takes the Laws of Moses to their logical conclusion.

Here is the good news! Believe, my friends, for it is the best news of all!

Jesus has come into this world to abolish hatred and promote love, only love. Friends, we are here not to hate or judge each other but to love and accept each other! Wow!

The Church of Jesus Christ is dying because all people, even non-Christ-followers, can see the hypocrisy in the words and actions of so many people who call themselves Christians.

Jesus gave us two commandments, only two. He said, "Love God." He also said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." What does that mean?

Well, for Peter, it meant that suddenly, his neighbor was not only the Jewish guy who lived next door, but also the hated Roman soldier who lived in the fancy house down the road. Suddenly, Peter, the good devoted Jew found himself baptizing, eating, and drinking, with an oppressive Roman soldier, a man who traditionally stood for everything Peter had been taught to oppose.

The time has come to ask you, my friends, whom do you hate? Whom do you think should never, ever, be permitted to enter these walls? Criminals? Poor people? Smelly People? People of different races? People of different nationalities or cultures? People with different sexual orientations? I can go on and on. The question facing Christians, or followers of Christ, is who is in and who is out?

This scripture passage represents a huge turning point for the early church. Suddenly, God declares that the Jews are yes, holy, yes, a wonderful example, but fundamentally, a person does not have to be Jewish in order to be fully welcomed as a follower of Jesus Christ.

So yes, as offensive as it may sound to some, a person does not have to be "straight" whatever that means, to follow Jesus Christ. A person does not have to be an "American" to follow Jesus Christ. A person does not have to be "white" to follow Jesus Christ. A person does not have to be a member of a certain denomination to follow Jesus Christ. A person does not have to be male or female to follow Jesus Christ.

In short, we don't have to come to Jesus because Jesus has come to us. Hear the good news and be at peace with yourself. God loves you. God loves you more than you can ever imagine. God looks at you, knows you, and says, come, come to me.

Christ us for all of us and says you everyone, "Be with me, stay with me, love me, because I, my beloved child, I love you."

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.