

Repentance Leads to Life

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 11:1-18 / September 21, 2025

Introduction:

Our passage this morning, in Acts 11:1-18, concludes Luke's account of how God revealed believing Gentiles are part of His covenant people. After God discloses and displays how He shows no partiality among those who receive gospel blessings, there is one more step needed to ensure the church is primed for advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. In continuity with the gospel's spread to Samaria, the church in Jerusalem needed confirmation of how the Spirit had moved. This time, instead of sending apostles to Caesarea, Peter shares what happened when he returns to Jerusalem. What transpires is a powerful story that brings every significant element from chapter 10 back into focus to communicate the importance of this moment in time for God's kingdom purposes. This story centers on one thing,

The Irrefutable Testimony of God

Consider how Luke sets the stage in verses 1-3. Look there with me, "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'" A new section of material is introduced with the word "now," but linked directly to what came before by describing the apostles and brothers throughout Judea hearing of the Gentile conversions in Caesarea. Then, immediately upon arrival in Jerusalem, Peter is met with criticism by "the circumcision party" because he visited and ate with "uncircumcised men." The term "circumcision party" distinguishes Hebraic Jews from Hellenistic Jews, and in the narrative flow, they should be seen as part of the "brothers" from verse 1. Their criticism reminds us of Peter's statement to Cornelius' household of how unlawful it was for him to be there, and the Mishnaic law forbidding acceptance of hospitality from Gentiles. Not only that, but the intertestamental book of Jubilees, which may have influenced them, specifically said, "Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them; and do not imitate them, nor associate with them" (Jubilees 22:16). Now, it doesn't appear the goal is to demean these brothers for this criticism but to reemphasize the significance of what has taken place and set up Peter's counter in verses 4-17. A counter that follows the typical pattern of a defense speech with forensic rhetoric and emphasizes the irrefutable testimony of God. As Richard Longenecker comments, "Peter defended his actions by recounting his experiences at Joppa and Caesarea, with an emphasis on (1) the divine initiative in all that transpired and (2) his inability to withstand God" (Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 9: John and Acts, p. 397). Follow how he relays these things. Look at verses 4-10, "But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven.'" Peter begins with the vision he received, sharing how he examined the sheet "closely" or "intently," and specifically mentions "beasts of prey," or "wild beasts" as some of the animals on the sheet. Note how he relays his objections to the command to eat and the conversation repeating three times. Peter draws out his careful examination of the vision before highlighting God's initiative to press into his objections and confirm its perfection. Notice how Peter continues in verses 11-12, "And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction." Pause there. The moment of the three men's arrival and the Spirit's command "to go with them, making no distinction" are emphasized with the word "behold," focusing again on God's initiative.

Pick back up in verses 12-16, “These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” These verses are full of new details which we, as readers, haven’t heard yet. First, we discover the exact number of brothers who accompanied Peter. The six of them, together with Peter, make seven witnesses. Some commentators point out how seven is the perfect number. Others suggest a connection to Egyptian law requiring seven witnesses to prove a case, or Roman law where seven seals authenticated an important document, both of which would have been familiar to those present and Luke’s readers. While we aren’t sure the number of witnesses holds significance, we know these six brothers confirming Peter’s report does. Second, we discover Cornelius told them the angel said Peter would declare a message of salvation for him and his whole household. Lastly, Peter relays how the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, “just as on us at the beginning,” which caused him to remember the word of the Lord. This word came in Acts 1:4-5, when Jesus said, “wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” This tells us Peter is referring to the apostles and disciples gathered in the upper room when he says, “just as on us in the beginning.” Now, pay attention to verse 17, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” This drives his point home. If the Gentile experience is equal to the upper room experience, he could not stand in the way of what God has done. Think with me about the correlation of this statement to Peter’s comments in verse 47 of chapter 10. There Peter asked a similar question, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” John Stott points out how both contain almost identical Greek expressions. 10:47 reads “dynatai kōlyesai” for “can withhold,” and 11:17 read “dynatos kōlyesai” for “could stand,” which literally mean, “able to forbid, refuse or prevent” (John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 196). Both questions are rhetorical with a design to communicate an inability to refuse that God has brought the Gentiles into His covenant people. It was Spirit moving in the same way as the upper room that communicated decisively for Peter that Gentile believers were full citizens in the new covenant community, apart from Judaism. Notice how Luke concludes in verse 18, “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” Any criticism and questions were silenced and what came from their lips was worship that proclaimed an astoundingly marvelous truth, “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” I want to draw out two truths their worship communicates. First,

God Granted Repentance

Pay attention to the phrasing of the first part of their worship, “God has granted repentance.” Repentance means to change one’s mind, involving the mode of thought or feelings. In the case of salvation, it involves turning from the pleasures of sin to the pleasures of God. From a love of the world to a love for God. From seeking satisfaction in all the broken things our world tries to offer, to seeking satisfaction in God as the fountain of living waters. Now, when we think of repentance, who is typically carrying out this action? We are. Yet, the phrasing says, “God has granted repentance.” Cornelius and his household repented, but God was the initiator by granting their repentance. What is this communicating? Salvation involves two things, God’s sovereignty and mankind’s responsibility. The Spirit’s work and our response. God, in His abundant grace, reaches down in mercy to give repentance, and we repent, turning to that amazing grace to receive His mercy. And here’s the deal family, there is mystery in this that we simply need to embrace rather than trying to tie our neat little bows around understanding it. Because when we embrace that mystery, we will be left in awe and wonder at the glory of God, with nothing to do but worship like these believers did.

The second truth is that,

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The ending of their praise goes against most of what we hear today. We are told speaking about repentance only brings shame and keeps us from our potential. There is no need to speak about sin, let's just focus on the good in humanity. Now, I am not advocating that we live in our lives filled with guilt and shame. But, what we see here, is that repentance doesn't steal from us. It actually leads to true life. Jesus said in John 10:7-11, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus came to give life abundantly, and Scripture tells us that life starts with repentance. True life begins by turning to Christ in confession of sin and trusting in His sacrificial death on the cross to open the door of salvation. Yet, true life is also lived in continual hope-filled repentance. 1 John 1:5-2:2 says, "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." John calls us to walk in the light and not in darkness to ensure we have fellowship with Christ and know His blood cleanses us from sin. Notice how he continues, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." John tells us not to deceive ourselves into thinking we no longer sin after coming to Christ but continually confess our sin because we know God will forgive and cleanse us as we repent. Then, he concludes by saying though he writes to keep us from sin, Jesus is our advocate with the father and the appeasing payment for all our sins, past, present, and future. Family, what moves the ongoing practice of repentance from holding us in shame to leading to life is not denying our sin, but knowing every confessed sin is covered by the blood of Jesus and mercy is promised for them. Look at how author of Hebrews drives this home in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We continually repent and draw near to the throne of grace, "that," or for the purpose of receiving mercy and grace in our time of need. Fight sin, but when you fall, don't cower in shame. Run to the throne of grace, falling at the feet of your high priest and advocate to receive mercy and grace to help you keep fighting. Just this week, I needed to do this. When I saw the darkness of my sin, I confessed it and clung to the mercy of God, finding grace for my battle with it.

Conclusion:

So, as we bring our time this morning to a close, I want to give an application and an implication from the powerful stories of salvation we see in Acts 9-11. The application is to,

1) Strengthen Our Trust in God's power in the Gospel

Consider how we have seen the power of the gospel on display throughout chapters 9-11. Paul says in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." This is what Luke has shown us, isn't it? Saul was a Jew, so zealous for the law that he missed the Savior it pointed to and persecuted God's new covenant people. Yet, the power of the gospel changed him.

Cornelius was a Gentile soldier who served Rome while being sensitive to the God of Israel. And the power of the gospel saved him and his whole household. The gospel can break through the darkness and shine the light of the glory of God in Christ on unlikely recipients. Consider also at how it broke down discrimination in our passage and proved to the early Jewish Christians that God had granted repentance that leads to life to the Gentiles also. Let this story renew your faith in the power of the gospel and boldly share it with all peoples. An implication of these stories is to,

2) Humble Our Hearts and Repent

The conversions of Saul, Cornelius, and his whole household should cause us to ask if we are walking in the repentance that leads to life. Do we allow the truth of God's Word to hit our hearts and expose our sin? And when it exposes sin, does our sorrow lead to repentance? 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Search your heart to see if there are areas in your life that you need to repent of. Listen to the exhortation of James 4:5-10, "do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." Family, grace and exaltation come to the humble, who mourn and weep over sin. And we must do this for all sin, seeing how the Scriptures shows pride is as harmful as impurity. Gossip and slander as serious as sexual immorality. Strife and division as wicked as drunkenness and sensuality. Weep over all your sin and have that sorrow lead to hope-filled repentance, trusting that is where true life is found. As the worship team is coming up to lead us in a time of reflection and response, take time to consider these things and ask what God is calling you to believe desire or do in response to them. Let the Word of God reach into your heart to bolster your faith in the power of the gospel and call you to hope-filled repentance. Lean into godly sorrow today and let it lead you to repentance, knowing God will give grace, will draw near to you, and will exalt you. Then, let your trust and repentance lead you to boldly share the glorious truth of the gospel to all you come in contact with. As you respond, you are welcome to come and kneel before God in humility, sit and reflect, or stand and sing. We also have a team of people ready to pray with you worshipping on the front rows with lanyards on. Would you pray with me as we respond to God's Word together?