

Acts

-Acts 11:1-30 - The unfolding of the great mystery begins

In **Acts 10** the Holy Spirit has opened Peter's mind to the next huge step in fulfilment of God's original promise to Abraham in **Genesis 12:3**, that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (also in Genesis 22:18, 26:4).

The apostle Paul called it the "mystery made known to me by revelation" in **Ephesians 3:3**. And never to anyone else had this mystery been revealed that "has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets," **verse 5**. And what was this "mystery" that had never been understood by any other generation (verse 5)?

Paul answers that for us in **verse 6**: "This mystery is that through the gospel **the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel**, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

For a Jew there couldn't have been a greater shock - or cry of dismay, for that matter - as we see in **Acts 11:2-3**, because "when Peter went up to Jerusalem" to report on his visit with the Gentile Cornelius, "the circumcised (Jewish) believers **criticized** him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised (Gentile) men and ate with them.'" And Peter knew how serious that was, because the first thing he'd said on entering the house of Cornelius was, "You are well aware it's **against our law** for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him" (Acts 10:28).

Peter knew he was stepping across a line that years of Jewish tradition had drawn in the sand - that a Jew would never enter the house of a Gentile. The Jewish religious leaders in John 18:28, for instance, had refused to enter Pontius Pilate's house "for fear of being defiled."

So Peter has some explaining to do, which he does in **Acts 11:4-14**, giving a blow by blow report of how he came to visit Cornelius in the first place, with a couple of added bits that weren't in Acts 10. In **Acts 11:12**, for instance, Peter mentions it was "**The Spirit**" who "told me to have no hesitation" about visiting Cornelius, so this was entirely the Spirit's doing. And in **verse 14** the angel told Cornelius that Peter "will bring you a message through which you and all your household **will be saved**." Put those two additions together and we've got the **Holy Spirit opening up salvation to the Gentiles**.

This was staggering news, that the Gentiles were now “heirs together with Israel,” because the Jews believed God had chosen only them. But, as Peter goes on to explain in **verse 15**, he’d only just got going in his talk with all those gathered in Cornelius’ home, when suddenly “the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” - and these Gentiles began “speaking in tongues and praising God” just like the apostles on Pentecost in Acts 2:4. It’s at this same time, in **Acts 11:16**, that Peter also remembers Jesus saying, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” So, Peter concluded, “if God gave these Gentiles the same (Holy Spirit) gift as he gave us....who was I to think I could oppose God?”

Well, that did it, because in **verse 18** those who’d been critical of Peter “had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, **God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life.**’”

And there could be no greater blessing than that, because as Peter himself said back in **Acts 3:24-25**, “all the prophets from Samuel on....have foretold of these days....of the covenant God made to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” And that’s why, **Acts 3:26**, “God raised (Jesus from the dead) and sent him first to you (Jews) to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” And now in Acts 11 that blessing had been extended to the whole world too. The **great mystery of the ages** - the blessing of “ALL nations” and how it would be done - had begun. And in what way would this blessing be obvious in people? By the Holy Spirit “granting **repentance unto life.**”

And there could be no greater witness to Jesus than that, as to why he’d died and been raised back to life again. It would be seen in the Holy Spirit granting people **REPENTANCE**, first of all. Repentance meant a total change of heart, which springs from recognizing one’s deep personal need for forgiveness. And that time had now come for Gentiles too. As Peter explained to Cornelius in **Acts 10:43**, “All the prophets testify that everyone who believes in Jesus **receives forgiveness of sins.**” That’s the starting point for repentance. And it was now being granted to “everyone,” all Gentiles included, thanks to Jesus. And that’s what the Holy Spirit was now revealing to these Gentiles in Acts 10, to start them on the road to repentance too.

But that’s just the first part of what the Holy Spirit makes obvious in a person, because he also gifts people with “repentance **UNTO LIFE,**” **Acts 11:18**. It’s the granting of “life” that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power” for in **Acts 10:38**, which Peter defines in that same verse as “**healing all who were under the power of the devil.**”

Up to this point in Acts 11:18, therefore, the world had been under the power of the devil, but from now on the damage the devil had done to people, both Jew and Gentile, would be repaired. Or as Peter phrased it in Acts 3:19, “times of refreshing” were on the way, “until,” **verse 21**, “the time comes for God to restore everything as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

No wonder this statement in Acts 11:18 - that God had granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles too - can be said to be “the great watershed moment in the Bible.” Because this was the moment when the fulfillment of all those prophecies to Abraham, and the healing of all the terrible damage the devil had done since the Garden of Eden, and the great promise of God lifting the whole world up and out of “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature” and remoulding people of all nations into the human likeness of Jesus, would begin. No wonder those Jews criticizing Peter in Acts 11 were now “praising God.”

And here we are now, actually living in that time the great mystery was pointing to, when the Holy Spirit is granting repentance unto life to us Gentiles too. That being the case, **what can we expect to happen to us personally?**

Well, what happened next in Acts 11? Luke tell us in **verses 19-20** that the “good news about the Lord Jesus” had spread rapidly among both Jews and Gentile Greeks, resulting in “a great number of people believing and **turning to the Lord,**” **verse 21**. When this great news got back to Jerusalem, Barnabas was sent to Antioch to check things out, where he “**saw the evidence of the grace of God,**” **verse 23**.

So Barnabas was actually seeing the amazing difference the Holy Spirit was making in people, because here they were doing exactly what “repentance unto life” meant. Both Jews and Gentiles had grasped what Jesus had died and risen back to life for, and they were taking full advantage of it by turning to Jesus to heal them of all the muddled and weird thinking they’d picked up while “under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38).

Barnabas, who was himself “full of the Holy Spirit and faith (in what Jesus had died and risen for),” **verse 24**, was so thrilled that he spent all his time in Antioch “encouraging them all **to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts,**” **verse 23**, because he knew what would happen to them if they did. As the Holy Spirit enabled them to turn away from living like the culture they’d been soaked in all their lives up to that point, they would experience being refreshed and restored as promised in Acts 3:19 and 21 instead.

So, clearly, this is what we Gentiles can expect now too, right?

We can expect the Holy Spirit to grant us the same “turning to the Lord” for healing that was happening in Antioch. But notice it was turning to “**the Lord.**” They weren’t turning to Jesus as “Saviour,” they were turning to him as Lord. That’s because the Saviour part of Jesus’ ministry had been done. He’d died for the forgiveness of sins. But “repentance unto life” included sins being “wiped out” as well (Acts 2:19), which is what Jesus had been **raised up for** (Acts 3:26). And a person granted repentance unto life by the Holy Spirit understands this, that forgiveness of sins by Jesus as Saviour AND sins being wiped out by Jesus as resurrected Lord, are both included in Jesus’ ministry, which is why Jesus is such “good news” (Acts 11:20).

The focus on Jesus in Acts, therefore, turns from him being Saviour to being Lord, because as the resurrected LORD he’d been given power and authority over everything (Matthew 28:18). He was now “**BOTH Lord and Christ,**” Acts 2:36, but in Peter’s message to Cornelius in Acts 10:36 the focus was now on Jesus being “**LORD of all.**” And that’s what made Jesus such good news, because with that kind of power as the resurrected Lord, Jesus could free anyone and everyone from being “under the power of the devil,” verse 38.

And for Gentiles that was the best news possible, because unlike the Jews who’d been taught about God all their lives, Gentiles at that time were “without hope and **without God,**” Ephesians 2:12. They were “dead in their transgressions and sins, in which they used to live when they followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” verses 2-3. They had no power whatsoever over the power of the devil. But God, purely because of his love, mercy, kindness and grace (verses 4-5 and 7), “made us alive with Christ,” verse 5, and “raised us up with Christ,” verse 6, totally as his “gift” to us (verse 8). Which means **we’re now under the power of the Lord of all,** not the devil. And God made all this clear in Acts 11 when the Holy Spirit granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles too.

No wonder Barnabas “encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts,” Acts 11:23. “Remain true” means keep turning to the Lord of all to wipe out the rubbish the devil puts into our heads. And never give up trusting him to do it either, because that’s what God raised him up for - to “heal all who were under the power of the devil,” Acts 10:38.

This explains why “believers” were “first called Christians at Antioch,” Acts 11:26; it’s because their focus was so obviously and totally on “Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (10:38). And there’s a nice conclusion to Acts 11 as well, because when the whole Roman world was struck with a severe famine the Antioch church “provided help for the brothers living in Judea,” Acts 11:27-30. Gentiles now helping Jews. It truly was a watershed moment.