

# Q6.1. Why in Acts 10 did God tell Peter, *'Arise, Peter, kill and eat'*?

God was revealing to Peter in a vision that salvation is not just for Jews but also for Gentiles. It states clearly in the text that Peter understood this as the purpose of the vision. Peter's correct understanding of the vision resulted in an entire Gentile household receiving salvation.

## Introduction

Acts 10 is often misinterpreted as justification for killing and eating animals. In a vision given to Peter, a sheet of animals descended from the sky, and God told Peter, *"Arise, Peter, kill and eat!"* (Acts 10:13, NASB). Some take this to be incontrovertible evidence that God wants animals to be killed and eaten. A closer examination of the account, however, reveals that the vision had a very different purpose.

## Peter's Vision

The account starts with Peter having gone onto the roof of a house to pray.<sup>1</sup> There he became hungry and fell into a deep trance.<sup>2</sup> While in the trance, Peter had a vision of a sheet full of animals descending from the sky, *"and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and on it were all kinds of four-footed animals and*

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<sup>1</sup> "The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour" (Acts 10:9, NKJV).

<sup>2</sup> "He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance" (Acts 10:10, NIV).

*crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the sky*” (Acts 10:11-12, NASB). The animals on the sheet were, presumably, ones that were considered unclean according to Jewish law.<sup>3</sup> Then Peter heard the voice telling him to kill and eat the animals,<sup>4</sup> but Peter refused on account of him seeing the animals as impure and unclean: *“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’*” (Acts 10:14, NIV).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Vision's Purpose**

The purpose of the vision was to show Peter that God doesn't see any person as impure or unclean and that salvation is not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. Paul later echoes this same understanding in his letter to the Romans, *“Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too”* (Romans 3:29, BSB). Jews had up to that point abstained from associating with Gentiles since Gentiles were seen as impure and unclean. The meaning of the vision became clear to Peter when he went and visited Cornelius, who was a Gentile. Peter explains the meaning of the vision within the text when he says to Cornelius and his household, *“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean”* (Acts 10:28, NIV).

### **Could the Vision Have Two Purposes?**

Some may contend that the vision was not only about salvation but also about God wanting people to start killing and eating the animals that God had

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<sup>3</sup> “And since you are to regard them as unclean, you must not eat their meat; you must regard their carcasses as unclean” (Leviticus 11:11, NIV).

<sup>4</sup> “And a voice came to him, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat!’” (Acts 10:13, NASB 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Peter's refusal to eat the unclean animals on the sheet is further proof that Jesus had never declared all foods clean. His refusal would not make any sense if Jesus had already declared all foods clean. But since that is not what Jesus did when He was talking about eating with unwashed hands in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, this instruction from God in the vision to break His own previously established command to abstain from eating unclean animals perplexed Peter.

previously said never to eat. But if this were the case, there would be some amount of evidence that Peter and the other apostles henceforth began eating the flesh of unclean animals. There is clear evidence of Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit at the end of Acts 10, and there is also clear evidence that Paul in his letter to the Romans later taught that salvation is open to the Gentiles. But there is no evidence either in Acts 10 or anywhere else in Scripture of Peter or any other disciple of Jesus ever eating the flesh of unclean animals or teaching that it is acceptable to do so. Therefore the view that the vision had an additional purpose of adding unclean animals to the menu has no Scriptural support whatsoever. The sole purpose of the vision was to reveal to Peter that salvation is for everyone.

### **God Tests the Heart**

To someone unfamiliar with God's pedagogical style, it may seem strange that God would perplex Peter with a vision about killing and eating unclean animals instead of straightforwardly telling him that salvation is open to Gentiles. God wanted Peter to grapple with the meaning of the vision until it made sense to him. Throughout Scripture, God tests people in this way to reveal what is in their heart, *"I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds"* (Jeremiah 17:10, ESV).<sup>6</sup> For instance, in Genesis 22 God tested Abraham: *"Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham"* (Genesis 22:1, NKJV). The test was to know how much faith was in Abraham's heart and to cause him to grapple with

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<sup>6</sup> "Remember that these forty years the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness, so that He might humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commandments" (Deuteronomy 8:2, BSB).

what God would have to do in order to keep His promise.<sup>7</sup> God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac,<sup>8</sup> and then stopped him from doing it because that wasn't really what God wanted.<sup>9</sup> Abraham at least partially understood that God would provide the lamb,<sup>10</sup> even though he evidently didn't fully understand that Jesus would be the Lamb.<sup>11</sup> The point is that God did not actually want Abraham to kill Isaac, even though those were His exact instructions.

### **Peter Passed the Test**

Although Peter's vision was not explicitly referred to as a test, it shows all the signs of being a test. God gave an instruction contrary to His stated desire, "*You must not eat any detestable animals that are ceremonially unclean*" (Deuteronomy 14:3, NLT).<sup>12</sup> Peter pondered over the meaning of the vision until he understood it, and then he acted on his understanding, "*While Peter was puzzling over the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house and approached the gate*" (Acts 10:17, BSB). If Peter had woken up from the trance and began killing and eating unclean animals, he would have failed the test and the Gentile household of Cornelius would not have been saved. The house of Cornelius receiving salvation is proof that Peter passed the

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<sup>7</sup> "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:17-19, NIV).

<sup>8</sup> "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.'" (Genesis 22:2, NIV).

<sup>9</sup> "And He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'" (Genesis 22:12, NKJV).

<sup>10</sup> "And Abraham said, 'My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.' So the two of them went together" (Genesis 22:8, NKJV).

<sup>11</sup> "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29, NIV).

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the clearer passage is, "*Thou shalt not kill*" (Exodus 20:13, KJV).

test and correctly understood the vision. At no point anywhere in the text does God ever show any amount of displeasure with Peter over him not rising up to kill and eat animals.

### **The Significance of the Vision**

The reason this story makes sense and was significant is because Peter saw it as impure and unclean to kill and eat the animals in the vision. Notice he did not kill or eat the animals<sup>13</sup> but instead preached that Jesus died for everyone,<sup>14</sup> including for the Gentiles, *“Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism, but welcomes those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right’”* (Acts 10:34-35, BSB). After sufficiently contemplating its meaning, Peter understood the purpose of the vision, that it had nothing to do with food and everything to do with salvation. This is why God did not show any sign of displeasure in Peter’s refusal to kill and eat the animals. Peter passed God’s test,<sup>15</sup> understood the vision, and fulfilled the inspired calling which had enormous significance for salvation of Gentiles, *“Turn at my rebuke; Surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you”* (Proverbs 1:23, NKJV). Even on that first visit to the home of Cornelius, all who heard Peter’s words received the Holy Spirit: *“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God”* (Acts 10:44-46, NIV).

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<sup>13</sup> “The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven” (Acts 10:15-16, NIV).

<sup>14</sup> “He has sent this message to the people of Israel, proclaiming the gospel of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36, BSB).

<sup>15</sup> “Search me, God, and know my heart; Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139:23, NASB).

## **Are You Passing God's Test?**

Peter passed God's test by pondering deeply over the meaning of the vision. He knew God is not a bloodthirsty hypocrite, so it couldn't have been that God was commanding him to actually start killing and eating animals. He recognized it as a test of the heart, *"The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the LORD tests the hearts"* (Proverbs 17:3, NKJV). And when Peter solved the puzzle, God was able to accomplish amazing things through Peter and his newfound understanding of God's plan for the Gentiles. The Bible says to examine ourselves, *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"* (2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV). Are you examining your own heart? Do you puzzle over the deeper meaning of Scriptures to discern God's perfect unchanging will of love for His whole creation?<sup>16</sup> The Bible instructs, *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"* (Romans 12:2, NKJV). Or do you instead search only for surface level interpretations that justify serving evil desires? The Bible warns, *"Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things"* (Philippians 3:19, ESV). Are you failing the test by misinterpreting Scripture to justify actions that are contrary to God's kingdom ideal? If so, Jesus shows us how to stop failing the test and instead to begin passing it, *"From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'"* (Matthew 4:17, NKJV).

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<sup>16</sup> "The LORD is good to all; His compassion rests on all He has made" (Psalm 145:9, BSB); "For I am the LORD, I do not change" (Malachi 3:6, NKJV). See also Hebrews 13:8.