

Acts 15:8–14 — God Which Knoweth the Hearts

Peter's Witness, Purifying Hearts by Faith, the Yoke Neither Fathers Nor We Could Bear, and No Difference

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:7–14

“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

“Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.”

“Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.”

God Which Knoweth the Hearts

The most important point in Peter's speech is the one with which it opens: God which knoweth the hearts. This is not said about one class of heart, or about hearts of a particular nation. It is said broadly and generally. God which knoweth the hearts — all hearts, every heart. No heart is hidden from him; no heart is outside his knowledge. The question of whether the Gentiles were acceptable to God without circumcision and the law was, at bottom, a question about the heart. And God settled it not by endorsing an external rite but by demonstrating that he knew and accepted the hearts of those Gentiles just as he had known and

accepted the hearts of Jewish believers.

The connection with Ecclesiastes 5:2 is fitting: God is in heaven and thou upon earth, therefore let thy words be few. Much disputing had preceded Peter's rising to speak (verse 7). A great deal of discussion had not put a finger on the issue. But when a man speaks from a heart that knows God, his words carry what the disputing could not. Peter spoke with an authority that did not come from his office alone but from his condition of soul. The multitude kept silence. That is the effect when the word of God and the fact of God's working are brought before an assembly by a man who is not speaking beyond his walk.

Purifying Their Hearts by Faith

Five words settle the whole matter: purifying their hearts by faith. This five-word phrase is the answer to every alternative that anyone might propose for the purifying of hearts. Purifying their hearts by circumcision — a horrible thought. Purifying their hearts by the law of Moses — equally terrible. Purifying their hearts by ritual, by a programme of religious observance, by improved self-esteem, by any of the whole shelf of modern self-help literature for Christians — none of these things. None of them could touch the heart. None of them reached what God reaches.

Faith is the instrument. It is not faith as a work of the soul but faith as the means by which the heart lays hold of the person and work of Christ. The Gentile believers at Cornelius's house had been purified in exactly this way, with no circumcision, no keeping of the Mosaic law, no ritual apparatus whatever. God gave them the Holy Spirit as he did to those at Pentecost, showing that he put no difference between them and the Jewish believers. The testimony of God himself, given by the gift of the Spirit, was the evidence that the heart had been reached and purified. What was this assembly at Jerusalem going to add to that?

A Yoke Neither Fathers Nor We Were Able to Bear

Peter's question is pointed: why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? The yoke was the law of Moses. The history of Israel was the history of a people who had agreed to bear it — all that the Lord has said we will do — and had failed again and again and again. The fathers could not bear it. The generation of Peter and the apostles could not bear it. And now some from the sect of the Pharisees wanted to fasten this yoke on Gentile believers who had come to Christ out of heathenism.

Galatians 5:1 answers: stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. The Gentile believers had never been under the Mosaic yoke to begin with. To put them under it now would be to move them from one form of bondage — heathenism — to another. Both were yokes; both were forms of bondage. What Peter is pressing is that the answer to both is the same: grace. Not a change of yoke, but freedom from yokes altogether through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The last words of verse 11 are notable for their order. Peter did not say the Gentiles would be saved in the same manner as the Jews. He said: we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. The Jew saved the same way as the Gentile, not the Gentile elevated to the level of the Jew. The order is reversed from what Jewish pride might have expected. It was a freedom statement, and a humbling one.

Barnabas and Paul: What God Had Wrought

After Peter sat down, all the multitude kept silence and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul. What they declared was not a theory or an argument but facts: miracles and wonders which God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. This is what was put before the assembly at the critical moment — not abstract theological construction but concrete, living, verifiable acts of God

among Gentile people. What miracles and wonders God had wrought. Not what they had done, but what God had done.

Throughout the whole proceedings of Acts 15, this pattern holds: it is what God has done that carries weight. Peter spoke of what God made choice of (verse 7), of what God gave as witness (verse 8). Barnabas and Paul declared what God had wrought. James will say that God at the first visited the Gentiles (verse 14). The self is absent from every account. The work being referred to was real work — not theoretical, not mathematical, not abstract. God had worked among living persons in real circumstances, and those facts were brought forward as the testimony that settled what argument could not.

The miracles and wonders among the Gentiles also carried the marks of apostleship. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians that the signs of an apostle were wrought among them. These were not random supernatural events but the seal of the Lord upon the apostolic ministry to the Gentiles. They were the living confirmation that God had sent Paul and Barnabas to that work, and that the work was his own.

No Difference: The Scope of That Phrase

God put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers in the matter of salvation. Romans 3 had established it doctrinally: all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, Jew and Gentile alike, with no difference as to guilt. Romans 10 establishes it on the positive side: there is no difference between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. Here in Acts 15 it is established by the testimony of what God had done. No difference in guilt before salvation; no difference in the manner of salvation; no difference in the evidence of salvation given by the gift of the Spirit.

Yet the no difference does not flatten all distinctions in God's purpose. Peter was speaking of salvation and of standing before God, not of every aspect of God's

dealings with Israel and the nations. The people taken out for the name of the Lord in this present time are a heavenly people, distinct from the earthly people of God in the millennium. First Corinthians 15 speaks of those who are heavenly as the heavenly ones. That distinction — between the heavenly people now and the earthly people in the millennial age — is not contradicted by the no difference of Acts 15 but stands alongside it on different ground.

Purifying their hearts by faith. And put no difference between us and them.