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Acts 28:17-31

- Greetings.
- Today, we bring our series on Acts to a close.
- The passage we will be looking at is [Acts 28:17-31](#).
- Before we get there, allow me to provide a little background.
- If you were here the week before last, you will recall that
 - Paul had been sent to Caesarea from Jerusalem, where he spent 2 years in prison under Felix, ministering to him and his wife Drusilla, despite the fact that he was being wrongfully detained.
 - Felix was then succeeded by Festus, during whose reign, Paul appeals to Caesar.
 - Festus, not knowing what to write in a letter that must accompany Paul to Rome, invites King Agrippa and his sister Bernice to hear Paul, in the hope that the king, who was a specialist in Jewish religious matters, could help him.
 - I suggested that these 3 figures were archetypes for the sort of personalities we see when people are presented with the gospel.
 - Felix was the Rational Cynic
 - Bernice was the Passive Spectator
 - Agrippa was the Postponing Politician.

- My encouragement to you was that Paul, fully aware of these types, did not flinch, did not resort to a defence of himself, but continued to present the gospel faithfully.
- In [Acts 27](#), Paul, under the watch of a centurion named Julius, set sail for Rome.
- It is an arduous journey with storms and shipwrecks and snakebites, but I am told that I am forbidden from ever speaking about snakes and spiders again!
- Eventually, Paul arrives in Rome and is allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier, who guarded him.
- It is at this point that we pick up the narrative.

Acts 28:17–31 ESV

¹⁷ After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. ¹⁸ When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹ But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰ For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” ²¹ And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. ²² But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law

of Moses and from the Prophets.²⁴ And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.²⁵ And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

²⁶ “ ‘Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.”²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

- This morning, I would like for us to focus on Paul’s use of the prophecy from Isaiah.
- Now it so happens that Paul is not the only one to quote this prophecy; Jesus quoted it as well.
- If something is repeated so often in Scripture, it is worth stopping and paying attention.
- To fully appreciate the significance of the message this prophecy is conveying across the length and breadth of the Scriptures, I would like for us to take a fresh look at the various contexts within which the words were uttered, as well as the phrasing that was used.
- We will begin with Isaiah. Next, we will consider Matthew. Jesus references this prophecy in the other gospels as well, but the instance in Matthew is particularly noteworthy.

- We will end by considering the implications of the use of this prophecy in Acts.

Isaiah

- By the time of Isaiah, the unified nation of Israel had split into two distinct kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem and focused his ministry on the southern kingdom of Judah and the house of David. He began his work following the 52-year reign of King Uzziah, a period sometimes described as a "Golden Age" that provided significant stability and economic prosperity.
- However, this success masked a deep spiritual decay; while the people's religious rituals remained intact, their hearts were far from God. Having ignored decades of previous warnings, God sent Isaiah as a "prosecuting prophet" to announce that He was giving them over to their own desires.
- God had reached the point where He had decided that He would actively harden His people to prevent repentance and ensure judgment. As the mouthpiece of God, Isaiah's prophecy functioned to cement their obstinacy and seal their fate, leading to an Assyrian invasion and eventually a Babylonian exile.
- Let's consider the phrasing in Isaiah:

Isaiah 6:9-10 ESV

⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

" 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'"

¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;

lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

- God is sending Isaiah to go and make a prophetic pronouncement.
- The pronouncement is to be issued in the *imperative* mood. That is, God tells Isaiah to issue the prophecy as an imperative, or as a command.
- This command is to be directed first at the people and then at God Himself.
- To the people, he is to say,
 - “Keep on hearing without understanding.”
 - “Keep on seeing, without perceiving.”
- To God, he is given the mandate to say (by the Spirit),
 - “Make the heart of this people dull.”
 - In Hebrew, this word that is translated here as dull literally means ‘fat,’ that is, calloused or thick.
- So, Isaiah is directed to go and issue a directive to the effect that the already-obscured faculties of these people would now be fully obscured, to the point where they would become spiritually unresponsive.
- Notice, that it is forward-looking. It has not yet taken place.
- Now let us look at the phrasing in [Matthew 13](#).
- But before we look at it, let us consider the context.

Jesus

- [Matthew 12](#) records the national rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

- The leadership of Israel officially reject Him. The chapter centres on a confrontation where they accuse Jesus of casting out demons by demonic power.
- Some scholars argue that this - the rejection of the messiahship of Jesus - is the unpardonable sin of which Jesus speaks in 12:31-32. That is a debate for another day.
- What is undeniable is that this national rejection marks a decisive turning point in Jesus' ministry.
- From that moment, Jesus began to speak in parables.
- The disciples then ask him why it is that He is speaking in parables.
- Jesus then responds as follows:

Matthew 13:13-15 ESV

¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

“ “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

- Some have argued that this parabolic form of teaching was not just a vehicle for revelation but a form of judgment, where Jesus does what was done in Isaiah, that is, He gives these people with their fat hearts what their fat hearts want.

- He obscures their faculties, hiding the truth from the masses as a form of judgment, only giving the interpretation of His parables to those who truly sought Him and sought an understanding of His words.
- But while Isaiah was speaking in the imperative mood, Jesus is speaking in the indicative mood, that is, Jesus is indicating something through what is being said.
- No longer is it that the heart of the people *would be* made dull (future tense). Jesus speaks in certain terms, making statements about a present reality; He is saying that their hearts *have grown* dull (or fat).
- In other words, Jesus is saying that the forward-looking prophecy of Isaiah was literally being fulfilled in His day.
- He, as the God-man, no longer needed to send a prophet to pronounce judgment; He simply passed it Himself by changing what He was doing with His words.
- Now, let us consider Paul again.

Paul

- As was his custom whenever he arrived in a new place, Paul sought to engage with the local Jewish leaders. At an appointed time, they came to his lodging in great numbers and from morning till evening, he expounded the Scriptures, trying to convince them about Jesus from the law and the prophets.
- Some were convinced while others disbelieved. It is at this point that Paul quotes Isaiah.
- The phraseology that he uses is identical to that of Jesus.
- The statement that follows, however, is incredibly significant.

- “Let it be known to you that this salvation of God *has been* sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”
- So what are the implications of this prophecy in Acts?
- God is bringing the narrative arc that had begun in Isaiah to a close and levelling the playing field.
 - The chosen people of God had for too long been engaging in their empty religiosity, stubbornly refusing to align themselves with what God was doing.
 - They did so 700 years before Christ, in the time of Isaiah. There was a judgment in the form of an Assyrian invasion and a Babylonian exile.
 - They did so during the life of Christ. There was a judgment in the form of parables, where God chose to hide His teaching from the masses.
 - They were doing so decades after Christ, during the lives of Paul and Luke.
 - Here, Paul proclaims that things have now reached a head, and as a consequence, judgment has become final and definitive. A pivot had officially taken place — the mission of God had now shifted away from the establishment that had existed for centuries and God’s salvation had now been extended beyond the Jews to the Gentiles!
 - This is not to say that redemption was no longer available to the Jews. Luke tells us that Paul lived there for two years, welcoming all who would come to proclaim to them the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - But a radical change had taken place: the opportunity to approach, seek, and draw near to God was no longer the privilege of a particular people group. The opportunity is now for all.

- This aligns with Jesus' mention of Isaiah's prophecy in [Mark 4](#).
 - As He was teaching beside the sea of Galilee, a very large crowd gathers to hear Him, such that He needs to get into a boat and teach from the sea, with everyone seated on the land. He was teaching them in parables.
 - He finishes this teaching session with the words, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"
 - After coming ashore, the crowd dissipates and Jesus finds Himself alone with the twelve and with an extended group of disciples and He says, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables."
- The implication is that there are outsiders, namely, those who show up for the show, tick the box and leave, and insiders, namely, the disciples, true seekers who follow after Jesus, who stick around after the show to draw close to Him, to dig and ask questions and seek clarity, who desperately want to understand and experience the secrets of the kingdom.
- Now this is great news — we all have free and equal access to God — but there is also a caution here.
- The Jewish nation had for centuries believed that they were OK. They were the chosen people of God. They were in right-standing with Him. In reality, however, they were just going through the motions. Their ears had become blocked, their eyes had become dull and their hearts had become fat.
- These repeat mentions of Isaiah's prophecy over the span of 700+ years goes to show that this is a common human condition. We can think we have it all together when we don't!

- Now, I must tell you that I have spent enough of my adult life going through the motions, showing up for the show and then leaving to chase after the things that don't matter. Part of my motive in looking for a church to Pastor full time was so that, for the balance of my life, I can throw myself fully into the study and ministry of the Word and into being a true disciple of Jesus.
- I did not fly 15000km around the world to come and sit here and go through the motions.
- I came to throw myself lock stock and barrel into the pursuit of God, and to invite as many as would come to do the same.
- This is the motive behind the first series that we will be launching next week.
- The series is entitled "Where the Spirit of the Lord is."
- The idea is to consider noteworthy instances in the Scriptures where the Spirit appears, to trace the narrative arc of His ministry across the canon from a Christocentric perspective, and to jointly press in to discern what the Spirit has in store for SVBC in the coming season.
- The idea is that we will not just do a series but that we will be disciples who are seeking after God, desperate for an encounter with Him.
- It is an invitation to adopt a fresh posture of prayerful and worshipful expectation.
- This, ultimately, is what Isaiah, and Jesus, and Paul were calling for.

Benediction

Romans 15:12-13 ESV

¹² And again Isaiah says,
“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.