

For the Hearts of This People Have Grown Dull

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The video version is available at: https://youtu.be/96E_hBuXjJ0

The scripture reading is Acts 28:16-31

With this teaching, we come to the end of the book of Acts. But it is not the end of the story of the Apostles' Journey. The book of Acts ends rather abruptly with Paul awaiting his day in court before Emperor Nero. Once Paul arrived in Rome, he was transferred to the custody of the commander of the Roman garrison.

Acts 28:16 NKJV 16 Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.

The guard referred to here is the Praetorian Guard; the elite army charged with protecting and policing the city of Rome. In the year when Paul arrives at Rome, the commander is Sextus Afranius Burrus. Burrus is one of three individuals who are responsible for the assassination of the previous Emperor Claudius and the placement of the teenage Nero as Emperor. Burrus, along with Nero's mother Agripina, and Seneca formed the triumvirate of power behind the scenes with Nero as the figurehead for the first few years of Nero's reign.

Paul is now in the presence of the most powerful leaders of the known world. How would this play out for Paul? Will he survive, and will the gospel indeed spread throughout the empire?

All along Paul's journeys, we have seen that he makes a mostly favorable impression among the Roman authorities he meets. Burrus is no exception to this positive assessment. Certainly, Julius, the Roman Centurion who escorted Paul to Rome, would have given Burrus a good report about Paul, including how Paul had succeeded in securing the survival and safety of the ship's crew and prisoners during their long journey and subsequent shipwreck.

Once Paul was turned over to the custody of Burrus, he was allowed to live in an apartment on his own but in chains and with the constant presence of a guard. Paul's guards were most likely a contingent of common Praetorian soldiers working in shifts. The chains which bound Paul did not confine him to a specific place within his dwelling, but as per the normal Roman practice, Paul would have been chained to the guard everywhere he went. Talk about a captive audience!

Paul would have wondered about his upcoming appearance before Nero. Paul determined that he would need some local support and sought out the local Jewish community to first make his case before them. Perhaps Paul understood that the Jews of Rome had mixed feelings towards followers of The Way. The previous Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews expelled from Rome over the disturbances caused by the sometimes-violent reactions to the Way on the part of some non-believing Jews.

Acts 28:17a NKJV 17 And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers...

Paul naturally assumed that the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem would send envoys to Rome to continue their case against him. In Jerusalem they had accused Paul of teaching against the Torah, against the Jewish people, And Against the Temple. Having assumed that the Jews of Rome had already received word from Jerusalem about Paul's pending trial before the Emperor, Paul made his case before them.

Acts 28:17b-20 NKJV 17 ...yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, 18 "who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. 19 "But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. 20 "For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain."

This passage from Acts 28:17-20 only provides a summary of Paul's defense before the Roman Jewish authorities. But these four verses have a lot to say. In his defense, Paul states again that he has done nothing against the Jewish people or against the "customs of our fathers." In this statement Paul was affirming that he strictly followed the Torah as well as the legal rulings of the sages contained in the Oral Torah.

Paul assured the Jews of Rome that he had not, nor had any intention of violating the Torah, the long-standing traditions of the Jewish people or denouncing the Judean leadership. Under Roman law, as a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to bring up the members of the Sanhedrin on charges of falsely accusing him, putting those members in jeopardy under Roman authority. He chose not to exercise that right.

Paul then used a partial quote from the prophet Jeremiah to explain that he saw no other choice than to appeal to Caesar to obtain a fair hearing. Paul used the phrase "the Hope of Israel" referring to the final redemption and the coming Messiah.

Jeremiah 17:13 NKJV 13 O LORD, the hope of Israel, All who forsake You shall be ashamed. "Those who depart from Me Shall be written in the earth, Because they have forsaken the LORD, The fountain of living waters."

The Jews that came to hear Paul seemed to have approached him with an open mind.

Acts 28:21-22 NKJV 21 Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. 22 "But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere."

It appears that Ananias and the Sadducees in Jerusalem had failed to pursue their case against Paul any further than before Festus in Caesarea. They had not sent envoys or even letters to Rome addressing their case against Paul at all. Perhaps they thought that just getting him out of the way and far away to Rome would be enough and would suffice to end the matter. They certainly had far more pressing problems on the home front with many factions and divisions among the Jewish population fighting with each other and dealing with the imposter Messiahs that seemed to be springing up everywhere.

The mainline Jews of Rome did not have a particularly good experience with the Christians and the reputation of the believers in Rome was anything but unblemished. The Romans looked down on the Christians as well because of the large number of Roman "converts" to the sect. The Roman historian Tacitus called the Christians "depraved... A most mischievous superstition... hated for their abominations"ⁱ. Tacitus also accused them of hatred against humanity.

Why is it that the Romans would display a hatred toward the believers? First Fruits of Zion in their work Chronicles of the Apostles explains.

"When Gentiles became God-fearing believers or proselytes to Judaism, they had to sever many old relationships and practices. They could no longer engage in... idolatrous feasts and festivals, and other family, civic, and national functions involving idolatrous worship."ⁱⁱ

New believers from among the Gentile population would no longer eat the same foods as the rest of the population. Believers adopted different standards of sexual morality and did not approve of the kinds of relationships that were common in the Roman society. They tended to withdraw from society at large and cluster together with others like themselves. Roman society was fine with the small population of Jews as a self-contained exclusive club, but when their friends and relatives became converts and believers, they were not so accepting.

As the Believers attracted more and more Gentiles to the movement, they disrupted the order of Roman society more and more. In response, the Jewish leaders wanted to disassociate themselves from the believers and God-fearers because the Romans saw no difference between the believers and the non-believing Jews and they didn't want to be expelled from the city again.

The leaders who came to speak with Paul wanted him to explain this sect called Christians from his perspective.

Acts 28:23-24 NKJV 23 So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. 24 And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved.

Paul spoke to a large group of the Roman Jewish community. This is the sixth group before whom Paul testified since his arrest in Jerusalem. Paul spoke at length to the large crowd. He told them of "the kingdom of God" and spent the better part of a day teaching about Messiah Yeshua from the Torah and the prophets. He presented proof text after proof text backing it up with testimony relating his own experiences.

Paul succeeded in persuading some of those present. Others disagreed with him. They left the meeting arguing with each other, but at least they were arguing about the kingdom of God! Could Paul have hoped for anything more? Before Paul dismissed them at the end of the day, he left them with the words of Isaiah the prophet.

Acts 28:25-27 NKJV 25 So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, 26 "saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; 27 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'"

Just as Yeshua himself had warned Paul that he would receive much resistance to the gospel message, so had the LORD warned Isaiah. He said that the people would hear and not understand; see and not perceive. Yeshua Himself quoted these same words of Isaiah to explain why he spoke to his disciples in parables.

Matthew 13:13-14 NKJV 13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive;

Paul had experienced first-hand that the hearts of the Jewish people had indeed grown dull. First Fruits of Zion explains why this Isaiah passage is so important and why it was quoted so often by Yeshua and the apostles.

“The passage (was quoted) to explain the divided Jewish reactions to the gospel. Calloused hearts, blinded eyes, and deafened ears were to blame... Had not Isaiah foreseen and foretold Israel’s rejection of the message long ago? The Almighty had surely foreseen that the nation would fail to repent and receive the appointed Messiah.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul clearly believed that this rejection of the gospel by the Jewish people would open the doors to extend God’s salvation to all the nations. In his earlier letter to the Romans, Paul explains this exchange.

Romans 11:11-12 NKJV 11 I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. 12 Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!

After Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah, he harshly rebuked the Jews as they departed.

Acts 28:28-29 NKJV 28 "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" 29 And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.

Paul remained in Rome for two more years awaiting his day in court before Nero.

Acts 28:30-31 NKJV 30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

Paul was able to entertain many visitors while under house arrest in Rome. He continued to preach and teach the kingdom of God to any and all who would listen. While at Rome Paul wrote four of his epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. It is easy to imagine that Paul must have spent many hours writing these and probably many other letters to the believers all around the Roman world. These four have been preserved for us today.

The book of Acts of the Apostles ends at this point before recording Paul’s seventh and last testimony of his captivity before Nero. It seems an incomplete work. Did Luke record any more, or write another volume that we do not have today? That will remain an unanswered question. What is known is that the Apostles’ Journey is not yet finished. There are many other epistles in our Bibles as well as extra-biblical documents that record bits and pieces of the continuing story. There is more to be told and more to learn and explore as we journey with them.

Study Questions:

1. How did Paul’s time in Rome allow the further and more rapid spread of the gospel?
2. How do you think Paul’s use of Jeremiah 17:13 and the broader prophecy found in Isaiah 6:8-13 effect those of the Roman Jewish community?
3. Discuss the implications of Paul’s rebuke at the end of his testimony before the Roman Jews found in Acts 28:28. What other times did Paul make a similar rebuke or statement? What did Yeshua have to say about this?
4. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

ⁱ Tacitus Annals 14.22

ⁱⁱ FFOZ, Chronicles of the Apostles, D.T. Lancaster, Vol 3 p904

ⁱⁱⁱ FFOZ, Chronicles of the Apostles, D.T. Lancaster, Vol 3 p906