

4. Luke concluded his Acts record with an account of Paul's interaction with the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome (28:16-29). In the sense that Paul's characteristic practice was to first seek out and engage the Jews in the places he traveled, Luke's account is not at all surprising. But when it's recalled that Paul's appeal to Caesar was what brought him to Rome in the first place, the fact that Luke made no mention at all of any such appearance – though he noted that Paul spent two years in the city as Caesar's prisoner – seems strange to say the least.

As with the preceding context and Paul's ministry on Malta, Luke provided no explanation for this conspicuous omission, but it is doubtless true that Paul did appear before Caesar sometime (perhaps more than once) during his time in Rome. Similar to that omission is Luke's notable silence respecting Paul's interaction with the Roman believers over this two year period.

- Living under minimal constraint in his own rented quarters, Paul clearly was permitted visitors. If he was permitted to call the Jewish leaders to himself after only three days in Rome (28:17), there's no reason to believe he'd not have the same privileges with members of the Roman church.
- The only plausible justification for concluding otherwise is the fact that the Roman authorities were beginning by that time to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity and the latter was increasingly coming under suspicion as a threat to imperial authority and power. (Paul likely arrived in Rome in the spring of A. D. 61 and Nero's reign of terror against Christians began three years later.)

These and other questions will be addressed in the summary observations at the close of the commentary; at this point it's fitting to consider the narrative itself and the issues and concerns it raises.

- a. Again, Luke recorded that Paul sent for the leading Roman Jews on the third day after arriving in the city. He had been assigned to his quarters and was likely still waiting for his appearance before Caesar. Paul was being kept under the watch of only one guard, and that individual apparently gave him permission to call this group of Jews to meet with him in his residence.

The first thing of note in this account is the fact that none of the Jewish leaders knew anything about Paul, his background, or the history of his interaction with the Jews of Jerusalem or elsewhere. Paul had assumed they did, and so introduced himself and his reason for calling them by explaining how he found himself in bonds in Rome (28:17-20). It may appear surprising that, given Paul's notoriety throughout the eastern Mediterranean region – and even more so in Jerusalem, the epicenter of Judaism, news of him hadn't reached the Jewish community in Rome. But Rome was a long way from Jerusalem and information travelled slowly; even in the case of a man as infamous as Paul, it would have taken some time for word of him to reach the ears of his Roman countrymen.

- b. The Jewish leaders didn't know about Paul's history and reputation, but they were aware of the emerging sect of the Nazarene and the widespread disdain with which it was regarded (28:21-22). Their mention of that fact shows that Paul's opening explanation went beyond the summary Luke provides. Luke notes only Paul's defense that he had done nothing against his countrymen or the traditions of the Jewish faith, and that he was suffering his present fate solely because of his resolute embrace of the "*hope of Israel*" (v. 20).

The implication is that Paul went on – as he had in Jerusalem and Caesarea – to define that hope in terms of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. *Again, those contexts show that Paul was referring to the eschatological hope that fills the Jewish scriptures:* the hope held out from the point of the protoevangelium; the hope of deliverance, atonement, forgiveness, and life out of death in connection with the coming of the Messiah (cf. 22:1-16, 23:1-6, 24:10-21, 26:1-23). If the Jews listening to Paul hadn't previously recognized the essential relationship between the new Christian sect and their own Jewish faith and Scriptures, Paul confronted them with it that day in his quarters. And however much he said to them, it was sufficient to provoke their interest in hearing more.

- c. A day was set for another meeting, and when that day arrived Paul found a much larger group of people standing at his door. He welcomed them and immediately picked up where he'd left off, carefully and methodically explaining to them from the whole of their Scripture its revelation of Yahweh's promised kingdom and how everything had now been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (28:23; note again the centrality of this theme in both of Luke's accounts – cf. Luke 24:13-27, 44-48 with Acts 2:1-36, 3:12-26, 4:8-11, 23-28, 6:9-7:53, 8:26-35, 10:34-43, 13:14-41, 15:1-21, 17:1-11, 18:24-28, etc.).

Paul was eager for his Jewish brethren to come to know their Messiah even as he had and so he happily labored with them in the Scriptures from morning until evening. And consistent with his work everywhere, some of those present were persuaded by the things he said, but others refused to believe. It has been said that men will believe anything when the truth is removed from their consideration, and so it was that day in Rome. Those Jews who refused to acknowledge and embrace the truth Paul uncovered for them with such careful and compelling precision were left with only their own musings. And that being the case, they could no more agree with one another than they could agree with Paul (28:24-25).

The apostle no doubt bore patiently with the wrangling and posturing, hoping and praying that clarity and truth would finally prevail. But eventually his patience came to an end when he realized further discussion was futile; these men were just like their fathers: blind, foolish and obstinate – men who'd closed their eyes and stopped their ears against Yahweh and His deliverance and healing. And so, as he had done with others of their countrymen (13:44-47, 18:4-6, 19:8-9), Paul cast them off with the proclamation that their God – the God of Israel – was taking His salvation to the Gentiles and *they* would listen (28:25-28).

Paul had spent the day working through the Scriptures in order to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is the messianic Savior they reveal from beginning to end. Now, he drew upon those same Scriptures to rebuke those among his hearers who refused to believe. Specifically, he cited a passage from Isaiah in order to connect them and their unbelief with their Jewish ancestors. *In this regard, it is of first importance to recognize that Paul envisioned this connection as one of fulfillment and not mere analogy.* That is, he wasn't simply saying to the unbelieving Jews there with him that they were like their unfaithful ancestors; he was indicating that their unbelief was a matter of fulfillment.

- This was the case first in that the divine judgment pronounced by Isaiah upon his own generation had continued through the centuries to finally sit on the heads of the nation of Israel in Paul's day.
- But it was also true in the sense that first-century Israel's unbelief – expressed in those individuals there in Paul's quarters – was itself a matter of divine purpose unto the goal of God's salvation going out to the ends of the earth.

The truth of these claims becomes evident when Paul's citation from Isaiah is considered in its scriptural, historical, salvation-historical, and canonical contexts.

- 1) The *scriptural* context for Paul's citation is the first six chapters of Isaiah's prophecy. The heart of that passage is Yahweh's indictment of Judah's unfaithfulness to Him – unfaithfulness that amounted to the trampling of the covenant and which was going to result in destruction, desolation and exile.
 - An ox knows its owner and a donkey knows its master's manger, but Israel – Yahweh's chosen and beloved son to whom He lavishly revealed Himself – didn't know his own Father (1:2-3). Both houses of Israel had forsaken Him, and though Yahweh had used every means to correct His covenant son and bring him back, it was all to no avail; Israel and Judah had proven themselves hopelessly intractable, beyond natural remedy.
 - So, in a stinging indictment, the prophet referred to Judah under the names *Sodom* and *Gomorraah*: Like those two cities – which every Israelite recognized as epitomizing man in his rebellion against God, Judah and Jerusalem had set themselves apart for destruction (1:4-24, 3:1-26).
 - And lest Judah and Israel complain that His punishing and desolating hand was coming against them unjustly, Yahweh had His prophet sing for them the song of His beloved (5:1-30). This song concerned the beloved's vineyard, revealed to be the houses of Israel and Judah. In the song the Lord rehearsed His loving intention and limitless labor and provision on behalf of His choice vineyard. He had done everything He could to secure its flourishing and fruitfulness and so had every reason and right to expect it to bear good fruit. And yet, its produce was utterly worthless (vv. 1-2); who, therefore, bore the responsibility for its condemnation (vv. 3-30)?

- Yahweh had justly determined to punish His covenant son with desolation and exile, but this wasn't to be the end of the story. When His righteous indignation had been satisfied, His wrath would yield to restoration. This restoration had a near-term historical referent in the return of the Judean exiles following the seventy-year captivity, but the ultimate referent was a promised day of spiritual renewal and restoration – the coming of Yahweh's everlasting kingdom. In that day, the sons of the covenant would return to Him in truth and perpetuity; beyond that, Israel's restoration would see the ingathering of the nations of the earth (1:24-2:4).
- And as restoration was to have both a national/temporal and a global/spiritual fulfillment, so it was with the decreed judgment. Destruction, desolation and exile were coming upon Judah and Israel, but those national judgments prefigured another ultimate and final day of Yahweh's indignation: a day of reckoning against all of Adam's race. In that day He was going to arise and make the whole earth tremble, with the result that human loftiness would be abased forever (cf. 2:12-22; 3:1-26).
- But most importantly (and consistent with all the prophets) this global/spiritual judgment and restoration (the prophetic "Day of the Lord") were to occur in connection with the coming of the Davidic Branch – the messianic Son of David promised in the Davidic Covenant (4:1-6, cf. also the extended *Immanuel* prophecy of chapters 7-12).

This is the backdrop for the passage Paul cited, which itself is part of Isaiah's visionary commissioning as Yahweh's prophet. This vision came to Isaiah in the year of King Uzziah's death (circa 740 B.C.), and through it the Lord called and commissioned the prophet, sending him to His people with a message of certain and imminent judgment (6:1-8). Importantly, this judgment was to be *spiritual* more than merely physical. Physical calamity and desolation were indeed appointed for the land as well as its inhabitants. Yahweh was going to drive His people out and put them under the yoke of Gentile domination in exile. *But their greater desolation would consist in eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, and hearts that do not understand and will not turn* (6:9-10).

Horrified at Yahweh's pronouncement, Isaiah asked how long this judgment was to endure and the Lord responded that it would continue until the desolation was comprehensive and complete. At the same time, it would not take every son of the covenant into its grasp; The Lord was going to spare a remnant – a holy seed in whom the life of Israel would be preserved (6:11-13).

- 2) This scriptural context, in turn, must be interpreted within the *historical* context. Although the opening chapters focus on Judah as the diminished form of the Davidic kingdom, Isaiah's prophetic ministry was ultimately concerned with both houses of Israel as together comprising Yahweh's chosen covenant nation (cf. 1:3-4, 5:1ff, 8:9-15, 11:1-12:6, 14:1ff, 41:1-14, 43:1ff, etc.).

The reason for this is the thoroughly messianic thrust of his prophecy, particularly as Isaiah presented this individual as the fulfillment and full realization of Israel as the Abrahamic seed (and covenant son of David), and therefore as Yahweh's faithful son, servant, disciple and witness to the nations.

Yahweh chose Abraham and set apart his descendants to be His covenant "son" (Exodus 4:21-23). By authentically and faithfully living out their sonship in the presence of the surrounding nations, the children of Israel would bear witness to their covenant Father/God and thus mediate His truth and blessing to the world. In this way they would fulfill their Abrahamic identity and calling.

But Israel had failed from the time of its "birth"; though God's son by election and calling, Israel showed itself to be a rebellious and incorrigible child, joining itself to the nations in opposition to Yahweh rather than testifying to Him through faithful devotion. In every generation and every circumstance the Lord acted as a faithful Father and Husband, ever pursuing His wayward people and continually calling them to return to Him with overtures of love, mercy and forgiveness. But the covenant son was resolved in his unfaithfulness, and at last the day of divine patience came to an end. The prophets are uniform in this testimony, and this dynamic is the historical backdrop for Yahweh's word of condemnation to Isaiah and its proper interpretation (ref. Isaiah 1:1-4, 30:8-9; cf. Hosea 1:1ff, 11:1-4).

- 3) The third contextual consideration is the broader *salvation-historical* context, which focuses on God's overall purpose and goal in Israel's unbelief. Again, the theme that pervades Isaiah's prophecy is Yahweh's promise of a messianic deliverer, and this theme has Israel's failure to be Israel as both its premise and basis. Thus Isaiah's vision is preceded by Yahweh's articulation of Israel's failed sonship and immediately followed by the *Immanuel* prophecy (7:1-25) and its subsequent elaboration (8:1-12:6).
- The historical and covenantal context for this prophecy was Yahweh's unwavering oath to uphold David's house and kingdom. The prophecy had a near-term referent in the preservation of Judah and Jerusalem in the face of the impending Syrian-Israelite invasion and the subsequent one by the king of Assyria (7:1-8:22, 10:1-19; note the historical fulfillment in chaps. 36-37). But that temporary preservation looked ahead to the true concern of the Davidic Covenant, namely the permanent establishment of David's kingdom under the reign of His singular Seed (9:1-7, 11:1-12:6).
 - Moreover, the everlasting Davidic kingdom would parallel its prototypical predecessor: David's dominion extended to all the lands granted in the Abrahamic Covenant (1 Kings 4:21), but as a composite kingdom consisting of Jews and Gentiles. The nations brought their tribute to him, but as Gentiles and not converts to Judaism. So it was to be in the messianic kingdom: The root and stem of Jesse would stand as the point of ingathering for all the nations of the earth (ref. again 7:1-3, 11:10-12).

Again, the marrow of the Abrahamic Covenant was that global blessing was bound up in Abraham and his seed; through that seed, to use Isaiah's language, the knowledge of God would once again fill the earth as the waters cover the seas (11:9; cf. 9:1-7). The nation of Israel was that corporate seed, but one which failed to fulfill its mediatorial calling as son, servant, disciple and witness to the world. Another Seed – another *Israel* – was needed, and Yahweh was going to provide that Seed in David's covenant Son, the messianic Servant. This One would succeed where Israel had failed; He would prove *faithful*, fulfilling Israel's identity as Yahweh's son, servant, disciple and witness, and by this faithful life in the presence of men accomplish Israel's calling to mediate the knowledge of Him (His blessing) to all the earth's families (cf. Isaiah 11:1-12, 42:1-9, 49:1-13; etc.).

Thus Israel's unbelief – though fully and solely chargeable to itself – served a crucial purpose in the outworking of the salvation history:

- First of all – and most closely connected to Isaiah's prophecy, the nation's unbelief and rebellion set the stage for, and even necessitated, God's provision of a new Israel. Given Israel's irremediable failure, the Abrahamic promise was doomed to non-fulfillment unless Yahweh intervened with another Abrahamic Seed.
 - But Israel's unbelief also served the Abrahamic promise in a second critical way, although one that would only become clear in the time of messianic fulfillment: Jewish unbelief was to be the primary mechanism for the outflow of the gospel beyond the sons of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentile peoples. What began in Jerusalem with a Jewish remnant was pressed outward into Judea, Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth largely through the opposition and hostile pursuit of the unbelieving covenant nation (cf. Acts 1:1-8 with 8:1-4; cf. also Romans 9-11).
- 4) The final context for Paul's citation is its *canonical* one. Specifically, the Isaianic pronouncement must be considered in the light of the New Testament witness as it records and interprets the fulfillment of the salvation history in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, this passage is cited four times in the New Testament, the last of which is the present one in Acts. The other three all occur in the Gospels.
- The first occurs in Matthew's account in which Jesus referred to it by way of answering His disciples' question concerning why He spoke to the people in parables (13:10-15).
 - The second is the parallel passage in Mark 4:10-12.
 - The third occurs in John's gospel in a completely different context. Rather than the Lord employing it, it is part of John's interpretive commentary on Israel's overall failure to recognize and embrace Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah revealed and promised in the Scriptures (12:20-41).

All of these considerations must be brought together in proper relation in order to do justice to Paul's meaning in using the Isaiah citation. And when that is done, several observations and conclusions emerge:

- The first observation pertains to the Isaiah passage itself, and that is that God's pronouncement highlighted *three agencies* (instruments) in Israel's condemnation and impending exile: Isaiah's prophetic word itself, God's judicial sentence, and the people's willful rebellion and self-desolation. *All three of these – and especially the last two – must be held together if one is to be faithful to the biblical text.* So, while the John context emphasizes the second agency, the synoptic (Matthew and Mark) and Acts contexts emphasize the third one.
- Taken together and interpreted within the Scripture's overall perspective, the two dynamics of God's judicial decree and Israel's willful unbelief must be understood as follows: *Yahweh did pronounce and enforce a judicial hardening upon His disobedient covenant son (so John's commentary in John 12), but only as His affirmation and sealing of the son's own willful incorrigibility* (Isaiah 1-6, Acts 28:27). Yahweh's decree of desolation and exile was His determination to bind Israel to its own resolve to resist all that He had done to make it a beautiful and fruitful vine (Isaiah 5:1-7; cf. 1:1-6; also Luke 13:34-35; Acts 7:51).

The Matthew and Mark citations affirm the same thing: Jesus spoke in parables, not to hide the truths of kingdom from His hearers (cf. John 10:22-39 with Matthew 21:33-45), but to indict most of them as not having eyes to see and ears to hear. Truth was present and accessible to all in His parables, but one needed to have ears to hear (Matthew 13:9, 43). Most had let their hearts become dull and closed their eyes, refusing to embrace and find healing in the Messiah sent to them (cf. Matthew 13:14-15) and God justly hardened them in their unbelief: It had not been granted to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom (13:11).

- This dynamic of God's historical judgment of Israel reaches beyond itself to speak to the general operation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Though men often want to emphasize one to the detriment, diminution, or effective exclusion of the other, the Scripture everywhere holds both together. God never concedes any qualification of His absolute sovereignty, but neither does He assume responsibility for any man's unbelief or condemnation (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7 and 63:7-10 with Jeremiah 2:1-17, 7:1-15, 32:30-35; Ezekiel 16:1-52, 18:1-32, 33:10-11; Hosea 11:1-7; Malachi 1:1-8; also John 5:37-40; James 1:13-14).

All men always do precisely what they choose for their own reasons, and yet their decisions and actions – which frequently contradict God's revealed will – never fall outside of His sovereign jurisdiction; in His hands, all things work toward the full and perfect accomplishment of His unchanging, all-encompassing purpose and will. So Jesus could insist that *all* the Scriptures testify of *Him*, though they record the operations and movement of a human world very much oblivious – if not overtly opposed – to the triune God and His will and work.

- More specific to the Acts context is the critical truth that God's judgment upon Israel – which was epitomized in the parallel exiles – continued on even into Paul's day. A Judean remnant did return to Canaan from Babylon and the temple and city of Jerusalem were rebuilt. However, both the prophetic word and the historical circumstance testified that that restoration didn't end Israel's exile.

The *pre-exile* prophets were in agreement that Yahweh was going to restore a remnant to Judah and Jerusalem, but they were equally agreed that the end of desolation and exile were tied to the messianic age and the establishment of David's true kingdom in his covenant Son. So the *post-exile* prophets encouraged the reconstruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem, but while being adamant that those accomplishments would not fulfill Yahweh's promise of restoration and regathering; the Davidic Branch was going to rebuild Yahweh's house and reconstitute the kingdom, and He would do so as a priest upon His throne (cf. Zechariah 6:9-15 with Haggai 1:1-2:9; Amos 9:11-15). *Israel's exile wouldn't end until Yahweh sent His Servant, the Branch of David, to judge and destroy His enemies, liberate and regather His people, and assume His royal throne. Exile would end when the kingdom of God was established.*

From the historical standpoint, the most poignant and painful evidence of exile and the desolation of the covenant kingdom was the fact of Gentile domination. In the case of both houses of Israel, the King had renounced His people and given them over to Gentile subjugation, and that state of affairs continued unabated into Jesus' generation. When He was born multitudes of Israelites from all twelve tribes were living in the covenant land (though many remained dispersed through the Near East and Europe), but under Roman rule; there was no Son of David on the throne of Israel. The children of Israel understood these things and were well aware that their exile hadn't come to an end. Their deliverance and restoration awaited Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom promised by the prophets.

In fact, the kingdom had come in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David (Matthew 12:22-28; Mark 1:14-15; Acts 2:22-36), being attested in His ascension and enthronement at Yahweh's right hand. Yahweh had indeed arisen in His Servant to overthrow His enemies and liberate His captive people and restore them to Himself (again, the promised "Day of the Lord"). Centuries earlier He'd justly cast them off into exile but now He had ended the enmity and ushered in the everlasting kingdom pledged to David. *But given the nature of that kingdom, the curse of exile continued for those Israelites who refused David's royal Son, and this is precisely the point Paul was emphasizing to his disbelieving hearers.*

The Isaianic curse continued for unbelieving Israel, but it served Yahweh's purpose to gather in the Gentiles. This is a predominant theme of the prophetic Scriptures, and so also of the book of Acts as Luke recounted its fulfillment in the life and progress of the early Church. Thus it's a fitting way for Luke to end his account: In the face of Israelite unbelief, God was sending His salvation to the Gentiles and they, like the remnant of Israel, would flee their exile to embrace their King (Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-10, 49:1-13).