

But there is another form of punishment we see mentioned in the Scriptures – not just the eternal but the temporal. That is what we see alluded to here. That these people Paul was talking to were just like those to whom Isaiah was being sent centuries before – blind, deaf, hard of heart, and thus rejecting the gospel. And so Paul is in essence saying then, “*Be warned. Take that approach and God will allow you to become yet more blind, more deaf, more hard – all to your soul’s peril.*” Jesus taught this very thing, quoting this same text from Isaiah in explaining why He taught in parables – partly to conceal.

Illustration:

But let me clarify something on this point. Some describe God’s choosing to save some and not others this way. Imagine standing in front of a pile of rocks and just arbitrarily throwing one in one pile and one in another. And they say, “*That’s the way you’re saying God does it. Sort of a ‘I’ll save him. I’ll save him not’ approach.*”

But that’s to mischaracterize this completely. It’s to assume the rejected rocks had some standing to begin with. None do. You see, our problem is that we’re amazed that God doesn’t save everyone. When the reality is that it’s amazing He saves anyone.

Application:

Now we need to be clear on Luke’s emphasis in what he’s conveying. Acts is not ending on some down note of gospel rejection (**READ Acts 28:28-31**). This is the dynamic we have seen all through the book of Acts – that the risen, ascended, ruling Lord Jesus is working in this world by His Spirit through the Church to open people’s eyes. And He is going to go about that work no matter the response of a few. Then and now.

All of which is to say that if our hearts have been opened then they should be overflowing with humility and praise for what He has done. No room for pride. And as we think of those around us whose hearts have not yet been opened, we then can pray to Him that He will do the same work in them that He has done in us. And if our hearts while not yet opened are still strangely warmed, here too we can go to Him in prayer and ask Him to grant us sight, hearing, softness to discern and understand these things.

CONCLUSION:

Back to the beginning – these two equally true components. We need to hold them both together – the human and the divine components in how one becomes a Christian. We need to hold them both in tension without letting either go. We can’t pull the trick in the tug-of-war games where just as you’re about to be pulled across the line you let go and watch the other side fall. Not here. Too much falls. So we hold both.

We need to remember that God does use us. Which means the light has to be “out there,” not hidden in a box. The salt has to be poured out of the shaker. And yet at the same time, we need to remember that our role is but as instruments. God has determined to work through us. And, literally, thank God He is – as the Irish say – able “*to strike straight blows with crooked sticks.*” Using fuzzy light and dulled salt. He knows the people to whom He sends us (or whom He has sent to us) more perceptively than we ever could hope to. He loves them more deeply than we ever would dare. And He alone is the one in the equation who can change their heart. And we have to hold both these things.

Can I just put it this way? We need to get comfortable in being uncomfortable, in not having all the answers. I know this may surprise you but God is big enough to handle our confusion. He is more than able to give us more clarity if and when we need it. And more humility and trust in the areas where such exhaustive knowledge is not ours to have.

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because of the complexities in how one becomes a Christian, (anchor) we cannot be simplistic in our thoughts on this issue.

II. THE DIVINE COMPONENT

That's the human component – the responsibility on our part as to whether one becomes a Christian – regarding both ourselves or someone else. But then there is the divine component. Here we need to look at the whole quote from Isaiah (**READ Acts 28:25-27**). Earlier, I described one portion of this as a diagnosis. But this is a sentence.

A) *Some Are Convinced*

There is a divine component being alluded to there. First, let's consider how this pertains to those who believe. What is behind every conversion, the bending of the knee, the yielding of a life to Christ? Again, through Acts we see examples. Back to Pisidian Antioch (**READ Acts 13:48**). Then the example of Lydia (**READ Acts 16:13-14**).

1. Election

What is the dynamic unfolding here – this “appointing” and “opening”? Let me read you a summary from J. I. Packer's helpful book, Concise Theology (**READ Packer, p.149**):

...before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ...This divine choice is an expression of free and sovereign grace, for it is unconstrained and unconditional, not merited by anything in those who are its subjects. God owes sinners no mercy of any kind, only condemnation; so it is a wonder, and matter of endless praise, that he should choose to save any of us; and doubly so when his choice involved the giving of his own Son to suffer as sin-bearer for the elect.

Summed up – we choose to accept God's offer of salvation because He chose us.

2. Effectual calling

How then do we see this worked out? How does this eternal choice intersect in space and time? The work of the Holy Spirit – convincing us of our need and the truth, enlightening and renewing the heart to understand and embrace the gospel. It's of God.

Illustration:

Let me tell you a story I heard recently of a girl named, “Divinia.” She was not a Christian but had been attending a Bible study for some number of weeks on one of the Gospels. She came every week not just with questions but with increasingly hostile, antagonistic questions. The leaders weren't sure why she was even there. Until finally one night she spoke up during the discussion time and said, “*I don't have so much a question as a statement.*” The leaders braced themselves for what was coming. She said, “*It's the craziest thing. I was riding home on the subway after last week's study and all of a sudden it just hit me. Jesus is God. I realized I believed it. And you know what? We've had the greatest week together.*” Now that, my friends, is the divine component.

B) *Some Are Not Convinced*

But there's another side to this component. For some are convinced. And some aren't. There's a difference between hearing and understanding, between seeing and perceiving. There are some whose hearts the Lord has convinced. And others whom He has not – at least, not yet. Listen again to the words from Isaiah (**READ Acts 28:26-27**).

1. Passed by

This is the negative side of God's choosing to save some. He does not choose to save all. Some are passed by. Now that may not seem fair in that not all are treated the same. But it is hardly unjust for, as Packer notes, none of us is in a position to make demands.

2. Punished

And those whom He passes by He punishes. Eternally in the sense of giving them what they want – to be left alone. Jesus spoke much about this, warning people of the terrible reality of hell and its torments – not because it delighted Him but because He loved them.

But why? That's what we need to trace back, looking at what is behind the reality that some are persuaded and others are not. And what we'll see, not surprisingly, is that the issues are complex. And because of that, we cannot be simplistic in our thoughts on this issue. There are two sides here – the human and the divine component – both spoken to in Paul's citing of these enigmatic words from Isaiah 6 here in verses 26 and 27.

I. THE HUMAN COMPONENT

First, the human component. Look with me at verse 27 (**READ Acts 28:27a**). This is a diagnosis, a description of their hearts' state and response to the gospel.

A) Some Believe

1. Some hear

Some hear. The hunger, the thirst within takes them to what is said to satisfy and slake.

2. Some embrace

And they embrace it. They find in the gospel the object of their hunger, the quenching of their thirst, the real knowing of Augustine's famous prayer, "*O Lord, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.*"

And clearly, there are examples of just this in the early church and Paul's ministry. During the first missionary journey, following the sermon preached in Pisidian Antioch (**READ Acts 13:42-43**). How encouraging this must have been – such conversions!

Illustration:

Now we're all versed in conversions of one type or another. People have such experiences when they change political parties or discover the newest diet such that all their friends just simply have to try. But not everyone is convinced. Hardly.

B) Some Disbelieve

1. Some hear

Some believe. Others disbelieve (**READ Acts 28:23b-24**). Paul labored hard to convince them of the good news of forgiveness and freedom from our sins through Jesus.

2. Some walk away

They heard with their ears. The sound waves entered the orifices on the sides of their heads. But they did not really hear. And so, rather than embracing, they walked away.

We read of this elsewhere in Acts as well. Back to Pisidian Antioch (**READ Acts 13:44-46**). Then in Corinth (**READ Acts 18:5-6**). And again in Ephesus (**READ Acts 19:8-9**).

Some were convinced, persuaded by what they heard and then believed. Others were not and then disbelieved. They weighed it in their minds and rejected it.

Application:

What do we make of such responses from the perspective of the human component? Well, if Paul labored at convincing and persuading people of the reality of the gospel, shouldn't we? It would seem there is the necessity on the disciple's part to be engaged – to use reason, persuasion, and proofs; to take people's questions seriously and engage with them where they are. It puts some responsibility on our shoulders.

And, if I can be so bold, it also puts some responsibility on their shoulders as well. Let me say something to those of you still weighing these things. Something's drawing you here – or Someone. You have questions about what you're hearing. That's good. But you need to pursue those questions. You need to think through the conclusions of your own assumptions. Granted – with some things in life, it doesn't really matter what your conclusions are. But with some things it does. Like this. It matters completely, immensely, eternally. And so you need to think this through.

May 15, 2005

“The Source of Persuasion” Acts 28:17-31

FCF: Lack of clarity in understanding why we are where we are

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because of the complexities in how one becomes a Christian,
(anchor) we cannot be simplistic in our thoughts on this issue.

SCRIPURE INTRODUCTION:

When you're not sure of how you got to where you are, sometimes it's good to retrace your steps. When you're lost and your directions are failing you, it's often wise to turn around and start over at the last point you were clear on. When your time is slipping away from you and at the end of the day you have no idea where it's gone, it can be helpful to keep a log. When your finances are out of whack and the end of the month is just too tight, keeping an eye on expenses may well set things right. Again, when you're not sure how you got where you are, sometimes it's good to retrace your steps.

But what of spiritual matters? Is it possible that in this realm we might yet be unclear as to “how we got where we are” but that here too we can retrace our steps in a way that would help us understand? Look with me at the second part of Acts 28.

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 28:17-31

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

A worldview is the grid, the filter, the lens through which one sees, interprets, and responds to the world around them. Which, of course, makes what constitutes it no small thing. The Christian worldview addresses the great questions of life – *Where did we come from? What's wrong with the world? What is our hope?* – in both an internally and externally consistent manner. Internally, in that within the system of thought itself, there are no ultimately contradictory principles. Externally, in that in adopting such a worldview, one finds that it more so than any other “fits” in a way true to our experience.

Having said that, the Christian worldview does not leave us without questions. It allows us to see truly but not exhaustively. I was discussing this point with a friend just a few days ago – “*Why is there suffering in the world?*” Not exactly one you can resolve over lunch. The knee-jerk response too often goes something like this – “*We reap what we sow.*” That is, evil circumstances come upon evil doers. True to a degree but if that's all that's said, we'll deserve to be lumped in with Job's friends as “miserable counselors.” It's just not that simple. Yes, we bring hard things on ourselves. But so too do others. And creation as well – it too is fallen. Satan, our enemy, is also said to be prowling about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And then there is God's sovereign hand – the hand that is upon everything that happens in some way or another. So why is there suffering in the world? The answer is among those in some unknown proportion.

Again, we can see truly without seeing exhaustively. Now, what, you may say does that have to do with Acts 28? I'm glad you asked. Paul has finally reached Rome. Soon after his arrival, as was his custom in any new city, he made contact with the local Jewish community – the only difference being in this case that, since he was under arrest, they had to come to him. He explains how it was that he came to Rome and that, ultimately, it was his devotion to “the hope of Israel” that set all this in motion. Not surprisingly, they knew nothing of the apostle but something of this new sect – regarding which, Paul was delighted to explain. But their response was less than he hoped (**READ Acts 28:23-24**). Some were convinced as to what he said and believed. Others were not and did not. Why? Some had eyes, ears, hearts that were receptive. Others did not.