

# Kingdom Warnings

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Acts 28:25-28

As the two travelers, Christian and Hopeful in Pilgrim's Progress, find their way to the Celestial City, not too far from the end of their journey home, they come to a pillar made of salt, a pillar to teach them. It is given to pilgrims to steer them away from the filthy hill of Greed and the silver mines of Demas.

As Luke concludes the Acts of Christ Jesus, and as Paul is in Rome, another monument is set before pilgrims, before the close of this marvelous book.

If Lot's wife was a woman to be remembered for her worldliness; here is a whole people made a warning tower against self-trust and self-righteousness.

The Kingdom of God is woven all throughout this last chapter – and thankfully the greater focus is on Kingdom Living, Kingdom Persuading, and as in our last message next week, Kingdom Welcome.

But here we find in a big way, a Kingdom Warning, where there is death instead of life, resistance instead of persuasion, and the door is slammed pretty hard as they walk out.

It is understandable that we would want a different ending to the great book of Acts. But let us consider two things as to why there is such a warning at the close.

1. First, the Acts is not a book given primarily to inspire the believer to evangelism and outreach, but to protect the

believer and the church, so we can evangelize and be faithful, unhindered by the powers that be.

This book is an apologetic, and a significant part of that defense is to explain why, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, that wherever the gospel went out, the Jews seemed always right there to oppose it. And by oppose it, I mean imprison it, beat it, stone it, chop its head off.

This book is wonderfully successful in telling the story of unbelief, of fleshly power and pride, of a refusal to follow their own Bible, and to continue in the career begun of rejecting the Son of God and crucifying Him on a cross.

Their wicked hands and God's purpose in rejecting the Jews – with notable exceptions – replays all throughout these 28 chapters, and closes on the same note.

2. Second, this has not only a local and immediate implication for the 1<sup>st</sup> century; the Jews rejected Jesus and His Kingdom for a reason – a fleshly reason. There are, of course, other fleshly reasons which have appeared over time, as they had arisen in the Jews even before the coming of Christ!

Their blindness, deafness, and deadness to the glorious, promised Christ, the Savior, for whom they had a front-row seat, is a warning for all men to ask – “am I a religious but hardened man?” “Am I a worshipper who trusts in myself?” “Am I, in the name of God, more interested in my pride, my own righteousness, than in recognizing how much in need Him?”

Let us begin with **occasion** of this warning – as found in verse 25; that they did not agree with one another.

Paul had testified to them all day long of the kingdom of God and the fulfillment of the OT regarding Jesus in 23. In response, as the sun is setting, some were persuaded and others did not believe.

They had the same facts, the same Bible, the same message set before them – but not the same outcome. Why do some reject the gospel and others do not?

Luke tells of this parting shot from the Bible, against them: “How appropriately, how fitting was what the Holy Spirit said through the Prophet Isaiah to your family”.

Here we are introduced to the **foundation** of his warning – not just the Word of God, but the Word of God found in Isaiah 6. If the Bible is a mirror, and we are to find ourselves in view there, who would choose this passage!

A Word given originally in an awesome setting; the Holy and Heavenly sovereignty of Jehovah; the Majestic awe of angels in beauty and power, crying out night and day, Holy, Holy, Holy; the filling of the temple with the robe of God; followed by the horrific sense of sin, of Isaiah’s confession regarding his lips; and that cure by a striking act of purifying with a heavenly coal upon his lips; and that followed by his peculiar commission.

But what was that commission? Go and speak to this people and make their hearts bloated, their ears deaf, their eyes blind. This

is not the go-to passage for a preacher's ordination or minister's charge!

Nevertheless, notice further in this foundation, that this owns a high view of Scripture. This is a prophetic Word; given through one of the most highly esteemed OT prophets, and one of the most Evangelical – so full of Gospel Promise. But it is not Isaiah's Word so much as God's Word; the Holy Spirit spoke so rightly through Isaiah; Holy men of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, what God spoke in times past stands for all time future; His inerrant and infallible Word does not have an expiration date. And that applies not just to the promises, which we love to pick; but the warnings as well.

So the foundation of this message from Paul is authoritative, sufficient, and applicable in a special way to the Jews who reject Jesus.

Some of our versions read "our fathers" at the end of 25, but the better reading is 'your fathers'. Paul sees the aptness of the Isaiah 6 passage to them because they are acorns fallen from the same tree. They are growing from the same root of unbelief, and producing the same fruit, or lack of it, in their lives. Jesus spoke the identical way – "Fill up the wrath of your fathers!" Like father, like son!

God's judgments do not change; His standard is the same – the moral will of God; His grace is the same – turn and be healed; His wrath is the same – it is real and coming; people are given over to the ways of dark and ultimate destruction.

That is such an important element of the Church's witness. People are not disagreeing with Presbyterians or Baptists or Methodists or Lutherans, but are disagreeing with the Word of God and the God of the Word.

When Augustine debated Pelagius; his opponent cried out: "hear me, hear me, hear me!" But Augustine replied: "let neither you hear me nor I hear you, but let us all listen to the Word of truth."

Let us come then to the **heart** of the warning – that is, that the Jews were rejecting the salvation of God delivered to them at the hand of Christ and by the Word of the Spirit.

Wading past all the hearing and not hearing, seeing and not seeing, the fat heart, plugged ears and closed eyes, we want to come to **what** is rejected – the healing God offered them in His Son.

"I – that is – I the LORD would heal them!" This healing is the salvation of God in the next verse. The healing, heaven-sent, heaven-bringing offer of salvation. Healing sickness is sometimes used as a metaphor for salvation. David wrote in Psalm 41: <sup>4</sup> *As for me, I said, "O LORD, be gracious to me; Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You." (Psa 41:4)* And Jeremiah the prophet: <sup>22</sup> *"Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness." "Behold, we come to You; For You are the LORD our God. (Jer 3:22)*

The picture drawn at the beginning of the book of Isaiah is of a man, bruised, sore, sick from head to toe: *The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint.* <sup>6</sup> *From the sole of the foot even to*

*the head there is nothing sound in it, only bruises, welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. (Isa 1:5-6)*

But now the the LORD has come with healing in His wings, a Good Physician attending to the sick. And see the Word of this Doctor seeking entrance into any opening of this burning house – the eargate, the eyegate, to reach the heart, to turn them from destruction! As Calvin says – “Christ’s doctrine is sufficient to lighten all the senses.”

We should recognize in this heart of the passage, this salvation, the words of our Savior to the Jews, during that last week leading up to His crucifixion. All those stories, those parables, of the landowner and his vineyard, and being rejected, and his son killed; the two sons – one who saying he’d do his father’s but didn’t and the one who said he wouldn’t and then did; and the marriage feast of the king, inviting many guests who excused themselves. All of this points to the warm, loving, merciful call and lament over Jerusalem – “Come! Come to the Feast! All is made ready!”

But, No! We will kill you if you invite us to live in your kingdom, be saved by your grace, bow to your ways! Paul had just outlined much of what the OT pointed to and to what has come with the Messiah and His Kingdom. He certainly would have pointed to the fulfilled prophecies, the types and shadows answered in the life and death of Jesus, the powerful miracles and wonders He did, as well as His speaking as never man spoke.

And what was the response? They called him a servant of the devil, doing the devil's work! Behind all of this is this diagnosis – the heart is blinded, deaf, dead in trespasses and sins, though walking about in a Jewish body, a Jewish context, steeped as high as heaven in privilege. This is the Lord's diagnosis – and man disagrees!

This brings us then to the **dire necessity** of this warning – they were hearing and not hearing or understanding; seeing and not seeing or perceiving; they have eyes, ears and a heart, but they are all profoundly messed up.

The heart is fat, disabled, stupid; the ears are plugged – the Word of God is in them but not in them, as they hear but do not hear savingly, not being mixed with faith; their eyes see but don't see – they are closed tight, the shades are drawn down on their souls; they are glued closed, refusing to see; this word is used often of sleeping or death; they are sleep-walking spiritually, dead while they live, with the judgment of God hanging over them.

This is all opposite to the Gentiles, to whom the Gospel has been sent already, and they will listen. The words of Isaiah 65 are being fulfilled.

This warning then – a call to hear to those who won't hear; a call to see to those who won't look; a call to believe to those who refuse to obey and trust the Lord – is meant to jolt them out of their slumbers of death and condemnation. It is meant to be a strong shaking of someone in a deep coma. It is meant for the Jews but it has a further function than to all those who, in all

likelihood, did not heed, and are right now in a Christless torment, awakened but too late to their greatest disability, their greatest sin – not coming to Jesus.

So the proper application is to ask: “Am I like these unbelieving men?” The gospel going to the Gentiles now, and their hearing is a wonderful welcome to the world; but that does not mean that all Gentiles will come; that none will harden their hearts, like Pharaoh of old, and reject the message of salvation. This is a mirror for me – am I seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing, is the light that is in me darkness? Am I truly a child of God, or will I cry out one day, “Lord, Lord?”

Here let us explore some further qualities of this passage and place them before us as a litmus test of our faith as we close:

The greatest commentator of old Princeton was JA Alexander, whose comments on this passage is worth repeating.

He takes careful notice how there is a different emphasis in the use Isaiah 6 originally, here in Acts, in the Gospels, and in Romans 11.

For instance, the emphasis in Isaiah 6 is that the preaching, the message itself, would make the heart heavy and dull, the ears deaf, and the eyes blind.

But in John 12, the emphasis is on the Lord blinding the eyes and hardening the heart when they saw the glory of the wonders Jesus did.

And here in Acts 28, the agent is not so much the Lord or the preacher, but the people are blinding and killing themselves.



Of course, all three of these elements are present in all these occurrences: men choose wickedly, the glory of Jesus is counted foolishness, and God in judgment gives them over more and more to their own dark ways, which they love. Yet we can emphasize these qualities and measure ourselves by them, to help us get at our own heart before the Lord. For remember, the heart is desperately sick, deceptively so, and who but the Lord can know it?

So **first** of all, is the Lord hardening your heart, making it more calloused, or do you see Him softening it by His grace, his love? Are you growing more and more tender to your God and Savior? Are you soft-hearted to the precious truth of His Word, the worship and honor of His name, and to the people of the church?

And as hardening touches on the topic of his election and rejection, are we making our election sure by making our calling sure? Have we saving faith? have we been turned from our sins, and turned to life – in our eyes and ears, our hearts and hands, from head to toe, to Him for life?

The **second** arena – of refusing to hear, rebelling from what we see, hardening ourselves to Him is in how we think of Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. Do we love Him to save us as our Redeemer? Do we adore His cross for us? Do we swim in His love, His grace, His mercy? The kindness of God our Savior has appeared – have we abandoned our own efforts to save ourselves, like the Jews did not? And have we fled to Him as our only hope for salvation and life?

Any other posture is suicide – trusting in yourself is the same as trusting in Baal or in Ishtar or some other idol. In fact, the results are precisely the same between the pagan worshipping his gods of wood and stone and the Jew bowing down to his image of self-righteousness – both become like those images, having eyes but don't see, ears but don't hear.

And **lastly**, here is another test, from Isaiah's day, where the Lord says it is the preaching itself that will make their hearts like stone, unresponsive, and dead.

The preaching of Jesus Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews – why? Because they did not want a Savior who would be their priest; they wanted a Savior who would be their King. They wanted a conqueror, to overthrow Caesar and Rome, and to install them, so good as they were, in their seats of authority. So they would not and could not see their sin. They disabled themselves by hating the message of the cross.

But that is not the only way we stumble at the message preached; this humble message, this humble means. There are those who want a message only about Jesus being a priest: “let him do it all for the people” they say. “Let those called by him fulfill all for us; let them serve and sacrifice and intercede and worship on our behalf.” There is no priesthood of the believer for the Roman Catholics, but the priests do it all.

The atoning death of Jesus will not only forgive you; it will also crucify you, so that you rise anew with him, as priests who love the presence of their God.

And **then** there are those who want a preaching of Jesus as only a wonderful teaching prophet, an instructor of the misguided, one who himself is open to correction as a merely human guide, the teachable teacher – and that is the preaching of modernism, or liberalism. They don't want a king to tell them what believe or do; and definitely not a sacrifice which tells them how sinful and weak they are.

What is your attitude to the word of God heralded to you precisely, fully, warmly, insistently, presenting the claims of God's Kingdom and His Son, the true and only Mediator, Prophet, Priest and King? Are your ears happily opened to the voice of your Good Shepherd? Are your eyes opened wide to behold the King in His beauty; looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith? Are your hearts opened freely, welcoming Him in, who stands at the door and knocks, who comes in to abide with you, to sup with you, and you with Him?

And how can we welcome others to Jesus – to have others welcome Him in – if we ourselves treat Him as a stranger, and keep Him out of doors? That is the message for next time as we bring our series on Acts to a close.

Amen.