



## Approaching God

Read Isaiah 55:8-9 and begin with an opening prayer (Consider that God is Transcendent)

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

## Countdown To Acts

Passage Introduction: The Nation of Israel under Roman Rule

Throughout the book of Acts, Israel was under Roman rule, which had been the case since Rome wrested the region from Syria in 64 BC. During the New Testament era, the Roman Empire ruled most of the known world. As you look at today's passages, think about the cultural pressures that God's people might have felt as this new gospel movement in Jesus began to take shape. What was God up to in the midst of all this?

## Bible Reading, Study & Meditation

Start with Engaging the Text: Take a few minutes to highlight, circle, or underline key words. Use the margins to take notes. What can you learn about what the nation of Israel faced under Roman rule?

Take some time to think about the social, political, and religious pressures that were present at the time of Jesus as Israel tried to maintain its identity under Roman rule. What was God up to in the midst of all this?

**Romans 13:1 - 1** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

**John 11:45-53 - 45** Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, **46** but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. **47** So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. **48** If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." **49** But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. **50** Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." **51** He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, **52** and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. **53** So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

**Romans 28:17-28 - 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."

### Close in Prayer:

What stood out to you in today's passage that was important or worth noting? Try to take a minute to summarize your thoughts in 1 or 2 sentences. What can you thank or praise God for? What do you want to trust him for today as you think about what God might be up to in the places that are challenging or difficult right now? Make that your simple prayer to the Lord.

### Israel Under Roman Rule

Legend tells us that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. The first seven kings of Rome increased the size of the kingdom by conquering neighboring territories. But eventually, a tyrannical king named Tarquinius Superbus drove the people to revolt. After this uprising, Rome became a republic which gave her citizens a voice in political and national affairs. As a republic, Rome grew even more powerful, reaching well beyond the borders of Italy into Africa, Asia, and Europe.

As anyone who has ever read Shakespeare knows, Roman leadership became increasingly unstable as the Empire grew larger. Ambition, paranoia, distrust, betrayal, and a lust for power made it very difficult for anyone to govern with stability for any length of time. Positions of authority in Rome had a high turnover rate due to assassinations, promotions, demotions, and transfers of power. By the time Rome took occupation of Israel, the Empire was large, but spread thin. Israel's location was strategic. It lay at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ruling Israel meant Rome would be able to move freely between the continents.

The Jews were defined by their worship, their temple practices, and their history as followers of one God, and one God only—Jehovah. Rome knew that devotion like this was hard to extinguish, so they reckoned it would be politically wise to leverage Israel's religious zeal as motivation to live at peace with their occupiers. Rome arranged a compromise. Israel could continue to practice their monotheistic religion so long as they obeyed Roman rule, paid their taxes, and kept the peace.

This was a shrewd psychological move. Under this arrangement, many in Israel came to see their right to worship God as a privilege that was now granted to them by Caesar, who could take it away if they fell out of line. We see this on display during the Triumphal Entry, when the Jewish religious leaders pleaded with Jesus to tell those laying down their palms and coats to stop referring to Him as a king. If Roman authorities heard this was happening, they might have shut down the Passover celebration. (Luke 19:37-40)

Under Roman law, Jews were given certain rights that made the arrangement more palatable. For example, they were excused from military service and from ever having to appear in court on the Sabbath. By the time we come to the book of Acts, the dealings between Jews and Romans were predominantly positive.