

What About Israel? (Part 2)

Text: Romans 9:30–10:21

Series: Book of Romans [#13]

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Theme: **Israel Illustrates Human Responsibility In Salvation.**

Introduction

Last week we entered a new section of Romans with chapter 9. In light of what Paul has written about the gospel and righteousness, that

- all Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty before God;
- that only true faith in Christ by God's grace saves, not keeping the Law;
- that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God and with each other in the church;
- that the overwhelming majority of Jews were rejecting Christ as the Messiah;

a logical question is "*What about Israel?*" "What about God's promises to them? Has He changed His mind?" "Do they have a future?" "What's going on? *What about Israel?*"

The focus last week in chapter 9 was on God being righteous despite Israel rejecting Christ. God was true to His word and promises. He never said every Jew would be saved. God is just in choosing each believer in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).

Paul's question in verse 30 of chapter 9 changes the focus from the righteous sovereignty of God in salvation to the responsibility of Israel, and all people in salvation. Many people struggle with reconciling God's righteous choice of believers and each person's responsibility for choosing or rejecting God and His salvation. As I noted last week, these truths mesh together perfectly, but we are not capable of seeing that perfect mesh. Our response should be to explore, describe and understand what we can from Scripture and accept by faith what we cannot understand.

In 1884 Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached a sermon on John 6:37 where Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Jesus' statement shows that God's sovereign choice of those He will save and the individual's responsibility to choose to come to Christ are wedded together. Spurgeon said, "These are two great Truths of God—let us carry them both with us and they will balance each other." He goes on,

"I was once asked to reconcile these two statements and I answered, 'No, I never reconcile friends.' These two passages never fall out—they are perfectly agreed! ... The grand declaration of the purpose of God that He will save His own is

quite consistent with the widest declaration that whoever will come to Christ shall be saved! It is folly to imagine a difference and then set about removing it!”

... “The truest way is to accept the difficulty”, he continues, “wherever you find it in God’s Word, and to exercise your faith upon it.”¹

Paul again expresses his concern for his people and that they would be saved. He then moves to show us why, from the human perspective, they were...

Missing Salvation.

One reason most of the Jews were missing salvation was that they pursued a righteousness based on their distorted view of truth rather than God’s clear truth. Let’s pick it up at verse 2.

“I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” (2-3)

Many of the Jewish people had a sincere, enthusiastic, even passionate commitment to follow God and His righteousness. Recall the rich young ruler in the gospels who told Jesus that he had kept all the commandments since his youth, or since age 12. But he realized he was still lacking something to inherit eternal life and he eagerly wanted to find it.² Paul himself, before he came to Christ, had quickly advanced up the ladder of Judaism’s elite “being,” as he wrote, “more extremely zealous” than his contemporaries.³

They did not have a deficiency in sincerity, enthusiasm or dedication. All the Olympic athletes who will begin competing in less than two weeks have these positive qualities. But that is not enough to give them a gold medal, just as sincere, enthusiastic dedication to be right with God is not enough to receive salvation.

A major part of Israel’s problem with Christ was due to a distorted view of God’s truth in the Old Testament about both the Messiah and righteousness. Paul tells us in verse 2 that their zeal was “not in accordance with knowledge.” That is, they did not have an accurate understanding of God’s truth. In verse 3 he says they did not “subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” They did not place themselves under God’s definition of righteousness. They did not submit to God’s truth that righteousness, salvation, is received as His free gift through faith in Jesus Christ. As a result, in the words of Jesus and Isaiah, they honored God “with their lips, but their heart [was] far away from [Him].”⁴

The Jewish people are not the only ones with this problem. Consider the many cults such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormonism which have many followers who are passionately and sacrificially committed, but not in accordance with knowledge, not submitting to God’s

truth. There are also many who believe what they want to believe. They pick a few ideas from here and a few from there. They can be very passionate about their own views.

Then as well, the Jewish people were missing salvation because they built a righteousness by their works rather than receiving God's righteousness by faith. Paul has already made this point a number of times in this letter, particularly in chapters 3 and 4. People are "justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (3:28). In fact, he wrote that no one will be justified by the works of the Law (3:20).

Here we see it clearly in verse 31 of chapter 9,

"but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works." (31-32a)

Trying to be justified by the works of the Law, by doing good things and not doing bad things, is mission impossible. We who are imperfect by nature cannot perfectly obey and fulfill God's Law.

This impossibility is part of Paul's point in verses 6 and 7 as he writes,

"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)."

He is saying it is impossible, ridiculous, even lunacy to think we could go up to heaven and bring the Messiah, the Savior, down to earth or that we could raise Christ from the dead. We *cannot* bring about our own righteousness.

Not only is this pursuit based on works not based on truth, it is one that never can bring certainty and rest. That is one of the tragedies of all manmade religion. There can be no final certainty that I have achieved righteousness and, then have peace or rest. The pursuit must always continue, always intensify. And it always falls short. In stark contrast is the certainty and resulting rest of accepting God's gift of righteousness by faith in Christ. That is a theme of Paul here and throughout the New Testament, especially in the apostle John's first letter.⁵

Finally, the Jewish people were missing salvation because they stumbled over the stumbling stone Who is in full, plain view rather than building on Him, Who is the cornerstone. Go to 9:31 again.

"Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.'" (31-33)

Paul was thinking of and citing Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah. In chapter 8, verses 14-15.

“Then He shall become a sanctuary; but to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Many will stumble over them, then they will fall and be broken; they will even be snared and caught.”

And in chapter 28 verse 16.

“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed.’”

The Jewish people were stumbling over Christ, their Messiah. Their distorted view of the Messiah and His salvation, their devotion to a system of works led them to not recognize but to take offense at, and to stumble over their Messiah. Instead of receiving His rich blessings, most of them continued on a path to judgment.

This picture of Jesus as the cornerstone has great beauty and depth. The apostle Peter picks it up in his first letter, chapter 2. In verse 4 he describes Christ as “a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God.” In verse 6 he goes to Isaiah's words, “Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.” Christ is

- a tested and costly cornerstone for the foundation of our righteousness;
- the choice and precious living stone who gives us life;
- the rejected stone to those who do not accept Him;
- the stumbling stone to those who take offense at Him.

Sadly, tragically, we see many today also rejecting and stumbling over Christ.

Looking at Israel *missing salvation*, we see in them the reality and an illustration of human responsibility in salvation. Paul not only deals with our responsibility in *missing salvation*, but also in...

Receiving Salvation.

Let's begin with Paul's well known description of God's process for reaching people. Drop down to verse 13.

“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach

unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” (13-17)

These verses are frequently read and considered by themselves. While that is fine, we need to make sure we keep the perspective of the entire section. Perspective is important. It was a joy this morning to dedicate Leif and his parents. Back when Tyler and Tabitha were preparing for his arrival, Tabitha had a talk with Tyler. She told him things were going to change for both of them. He needed to change and clean diapers, rock the baby to sleep, walk the floor with him at night, to go on walks and push the stroller, to do some of the cleaning, cooking, laundry and shopping. When she finally finished, Tyler responded, “And what are *you* going to be doing while *I* do all the work?” He had a bit different perspective. Okay, the conversation may not have been exactly like that, but you get the point: we need to have an accurate perspective to understand what someone is saying, especially to understand what *God is saying* in His word.

Paul goes on in verse 16 to point out the now obvious fact that all the Jews did not “heed” the good news. They were not *obeying* it. Then he draws on Psalm 19’s description of nature testifying of God in all the earth to picture that the gospel *has gone* to Israel, that they *have heard* the good news. He cites Moses and Isaiah to show that God would make Israel jealous and angry through the Gentiles being saved, and that God would be found by those who were neither looking or asking for Him.

How does all of this happen from a human perspective—Jews hearing and rejecting, Gentiles hearing and receiving Christ? God has chosen all who are His. This is certain truth. Just as certain is the truth that God has determined the means for reaching all people in all generations with the gospel, which is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16).

God’s chosen process for this begins with messengers being sent. When we read “How will they *preach*”, we think of pastors and missionaries. But the word Paul used means to be an appointed messenger, a herald making an announcement. Jesus has commissioned and sent every believer as a herald to announce the gospel. We are commissioned and sent and next, by God’s grace, wisdom and power, we are to actually be announcing, telling people the good news. When people hear the good news of Jesus Christ they can believe in Him, they can call upon Him to be saved. And everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord, who puts his or her trust in Christ, who obeys the gospel, will be saved.

So, we see both the responsibility of those who currently have not received God’s gift of salvation and that of believers who are to proclaim it.

The second aspect of receiving salvation involves God’s message for salvation. We need to know what it is we are to believe and obey in order to be saved. We have already seen that sincere, enthusiastic commitment does not in itself lead to being saved. What we

believe must be “in accordance with knowledge”, it must be based on, it must have its substance in God’s truth.

Paul repeats the truth that “Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness” here in verse 4. Christ has fulfilled the Law completely. He Himself is the fulfillment of the Law. And so, for all who believe in Him the requirements, the demands of the Law are now fulfilled in us, as we saw in chapter 8 verse 4.

It is not enough to believe that Jesus was a great man, a great teacher and a great example. In verse 9 Paul sums up who Jesus is and what He has accomplished for us in two descriptions. First, He is *Lord*. Turn back to chapter 1, verse 4. Paul writes that Christ

“was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In the Greek version of the Old Testament, which both Jews and Gentiles used in Paul’s day, this word *Lord* was used to translate the personal name of God, which we usually pronounce something like *Yahweh*. When *Lord* was used of Jesus in a setting such as this, those first century readers knew it meant that Jesus Christ is *God*. God the Son in human form, truly God and truly man, is our Savior. This truth is essential for salvation.

The second description is “that God raised Him from the dead.” Christ’s death, as we remembered and reflected on it in Communion this morning, *paid it all*. But the complete work of Christ for us is frequently summed up in the New Testament by the resurrection, as it is here and in 1:4. Christ’s resurrection was the proof of His victory over sin and death.

Any message of the Christian faith that is not rooted and grounded in these truths is not a true message. It is not Christian at all. Heresies err on both points. They deny either the full deity or full humanity of Christ. They deny or play games with the resurrection of Christ. They add our efforts, or certain special knowledge or experiences to Christ’s work for salvation. They sometimes say that there are or may be other ways to be saved. What we have here is a compact summary of God’s message for salvation. This is “the word of Christ” which is essential for true faith (17).

The final part of our responsibility in receiving salvation is the actual response. What does it mean to subject ourselves to God’s righteousness, to obey the good news? What response was required for those Jews and Gentiles, for anyone to be saved once we learn the truth of the gospel? The Scriptures repeatedly highlight the essential element of faith, and that is what Paul does that here.

- 9:30, the Gentiles attained “righteousness which is by *faith*.”
- 9:32, the Jews seeking righteousness their way “did not pursue it by *faith*.”
- 10:8, God’s word of salvation is “the word of *faith*.”

What does this faith look like? Go to verse 9.

“if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” (9-10)

That tells us this faith is believing in and with our hearts. Believing that is not just a passing curiosity or interest, but believing in and with the core of our being. Responding to Christ and receiving His salvation does not require a complete knowledge of the Bible, but it does require a complete faith or trust in Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. Responding to Christ and receiving His salvation does not require cleaning up our lives first, but it does require wholehearted faith to follow Christ and allow Him to work out His righteousness in how we live.

Just as Paul refers to believing twice here, so he also refers twice to *confessing*. This confession is a wholehearted and natural expression of Christ as my Savior. In 2 Corinthians 9:13 Paul speaks to those believers about their “confession of the gospel of Christ.” That is, their public statement and affirmation of faith in Christ. This confession is not required to be saved. It is the natural and expected response of everyone who is truly saved.

Conclusion.

Yes, Israel in its rejection of Christ illustrates our responsibility, human responsibility in salvation. And since the first century millions of people have not come to Christ and so have missed salvation.

We are concerned about the millions today we don't know personally, but especially about the few or many we know who are stumbling over, taking offense at, rejecting Christ. Sometimes after years of prayer and witness, we can become discouraged. It seems that there is no hope for them to come to eternal life in Christ.

In the 1970s archeologists excavating at Masada in Israel found some date palm seeds. They were recorded dutifully and filed in a drawer. Five years ago an agricultural teacher and researcher convinced the officials to give her three of those seeds. A snip of one seed was sent for radiocarbon dating. The results? That seed was 1,990 years old, plus or minus 50 years. A 2,000 year-old seed! The agriculturist soaked the seeds in hot water, next in hormones and finally in a fertilizer. Then she said, “I put them in new pots in new potting soil and plugged them into drip irrigation and kind of forgot about them.” Six weeks later one of those seeds came up. Three months later the date palm was about a foot tall. The plant has been nicknamed Methuselah. The seed that went to sleep when Jesus was on earth now came to life after 2,000 years!⁶

We do not know how many days, months or years it may be until some people we care about so much come to Christ. And, yes, we don't know with certainty that they will. But as long as there is life there is hope. There is much we do not know. There is much about

God's sovereignty and our responsibility that we cannot put together as perfectly as we would like. But we should never allow discouragement to take root in our heart and give up. Instead, we are to keep on being faithful in prayer and witness and trust God.

As you go to God now,

- Thank Him again for His great love and mercy, for choosing and calling you.
- Thank Him that Jesus Christ is the solid foundation stone for your life today and forever.
- Renew your commitment to keep on praying, to keep on interceding for people to come to Christ.
- And also renew your commitment to herald the good news of Christ to those who have not yet come to Him.

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon. "High Doctrine And Broad Doctrine" [Sermon #1762]. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. 1884. <<http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols28-30/chs1762.pdf>>, p. 1. Accessed 26 January 2010.

² See Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23.

³ Galatians 1:14.

⁴ Matthew 15:8; Isaiah 29:13.

⁵ e.g., 1 John 2:3, 5; 3:2, 14, 19-20, 24; 4:13; 5:13.

⁶ Steven Erlanger. "After 2,000 Years, a Seed From Ancient Judea Sprouts." *nytimes.com*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/12/international/middleeast/12palm.html>>. Accessed 28 January 2010.

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