

**THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-six**

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**CAN PEOPLE BE ZEALOUS FOR GOD AND REJECT HIM AT THE SAME TIME?**

**Romans 9:30-10:13** - "What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33] as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'... [10:1]...Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. [2] I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. [3] For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. [4] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. [5] For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. [6] But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) [7] or " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). [8] But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); [9] because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. [11] For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." [12] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. [13] For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

There are some issues so stunning they keep popping up to the surface of Paul's discussion in his letter to the Romans. One of the chief ones is the striking contrast between two people groups. The **Jews** were given so many advantages - hand-picked for special attention and repeated deliverance by God Himself - supplied with the **law** for their instruction and the **sacrificial system and priesthood** for their failings - and finally, through the very womb of Israel the **Messiah** of all mankind would be born. Yet, for all these blessings Israel **rejected** the very Messiah to whom she gave birth.

Then there were the **Gentiles**. They were given none of these blessings directly. They weren't even pretending to keep all the laws God gave to the Jewish people. Yet, says Paul, they were "**attaining righteousness**"(9:30 - "...That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it....").

All of this leads Paul to deal with our wonderment at just **how can these things be?** How did the **Jews** miss righteousness? And how did the **Gentiles** attain it? Today we simply can't imagine how shocking and disturbing all this was to the Jewish mind. It raised huge issues about everything they had come to believe. So much so that Paul had to address the whole issue of the **faithfulness of God** - **Romans 9:6a** - "**But it is not as though the word of God has failed....**"

Let's trace some of Paul's key thoughts in this passage:

1) **SOMEHOW, THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD DOES NOT DIMINISH THE FACTOR OF HUMAN RESPONSE**

**Romans 9:30-33** - "What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33] as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'"

The opening words are not new to us. "**What shall we say then,**" is Paul's standard launching point into issues he knows might breed argument in the Jewish mind. In **verses 25-29** of chapter nine Paul quoted two Old Testament texts proving God's awareness and prediction of the **inclusion** of the Gentiles in salvation - **9:25-26** - "**As indeed he says in Hosea, 'Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'** [26] 'And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

Paul also quote the Old Testament pointing out the **exclusion** of many Jews - **Romans 9:29** - "**And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.'**"

Because of these two shocking revelations one can understand why Paul opens this section the way he does. **“What shall we say, then?”** or, **“How can these things possibly be?”**, is a natural opening for Paul in this section.

Now here is the most important point in this whole section. ***The determining factor in each destiny - Gentile and Jew - is the factor of faith alone.*** People either **exercise** faith or they don't. And this factor of human response settles the issue of redemption. The dominant **Jewish** response was pride in the **reception** of the law rather than understanding the **purpose** of the law. Possession of the law became a religious badge - a hood ornament - a **membership card** to God - to prove their superiority over the Gentiles. This, you will remember, is exactly why Paul was forced to remind them that it wasn't **having** the law that made them righteous, but **obeying the law in faith**:

**Romans 2:17-23** - **“But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.”**

See Paul exposing the **contradiction** of the Jewish position. They had **pride** in being the people of the law and yet didn't **obey** the law. Or, in the words of today's text, even though they knew they didn't **keep** all the law, they still **“pursued a law that would lead to righteousness”**(9:31) as though it were **“based on works”**(9:32).

But how did the **Gentiles** find righteousness? That's a key question for Paul to answer because if righteousness came through the law the Gentiles never should have attained it. Yet Paul clearly says they **did** reach righteousness - **Romans 9:30** - **“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith....”**

Here's how it worked. The Gentiles, not having the law, at least didn't have the disadvantage of looking for righteousness in the **wrong** place. They couldn't count on any special status or relationship to the law of God because they were never **given** the written law of God. So they couldn't **boast** in any of these things. They were forced to rely on their **conscience** to drive them to Christ.

That's Paul's clear teaching in **Romans 1 and 2**. The Gentiles had no religious props. They had no distractions. Or, to put it more correctly, they had **nothing to divert their attention from Christ** when He was proclaimed to them.

And this is really the **key issue** of today's text. The hub of the wheel, in terms of this passage is **Romans 9:33** - **“...as it is written, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’”**The issue for both Jew and Gentile is a **Christological** issue. This is the most important point in the whole text.

Is there anything **wrong** in trying to be a good person? Is it a sin to try to obey God's laws? Absolutely not. No one should be indifferent to personal morality and righteousness. - Jew or Gentile. But the law must never **prevent** - must never be **used** - to keep anyone from Christ. That's why Paul calls Christ the **“stone of stumbling”** and the **“rock of offense.”** The law can breed a pride and arrogance that **disdains** Christ. And at that point, its whole intent has surely been distorted. Christ said He was the **fulfillment** of the whole law. He said the whole Old Testament testified of **Him**.

## 2) IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT PEOPLE WHO ARE ZEALOUS FOR GOD STILL NEED TO BE SAVED

**Romans 10:1-4** - **“Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. [2] I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. [3] For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. [4] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”**

The issue of the fate of those who have never heard of Christ is usually raised in later portions of this tenth chapter. I think that's a mistake. Paul actually raises it - and to my mind, settles it - in these opening verses. Paul **prays** for them to be saved in verse one - **“Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”** Then he describes their present **zeal for God** in verse two - **“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”**

In other words, he never assumes their hunger for personal righteousness delivers salvation. ***He never assumes their love for God, by itself, is redemptive.*** The end - the goal - the target - of all our hungers and aspirations for God and righteousness is ***Christ***. And Christ saves, it would appear from the wording of these verses, not ***generically***, or ***passively***, but through ***believing*** in Him - ***“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”***(10:4).

### 3) PAUL THEN SITES OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS REVEALING THE FUTILITY OF LEGAL RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

**Romans 10:5-10** - “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. [6] But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) [7] or “Who will descend into the abyss?” ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). [8] But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); [9] because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

A brief summary of this tricky passage would go something like this. **Chapter 9 verse 30 to chapter 10 verse 3** deal primarily with the ***failure of the Jews*** to find righteousness through the law. Then, **chapter 10 verse 4** holds out the beauty of the simplicity of ***faith in Christ***, the ***“end of the law,”*** who opened salvation for ***“all who would believe.”*** In **10:5-10** Paul turns his attention more directly to the ***inclusion of the Gentiles***, proving that salvation is ***indeed*** for ***all*** who would believe.

And the way Paul ***addresses*** this centrality of faith is to demonstrate from the Jewish Old Testament. Justification by faith is not a ***new*** idea. It is not something foreign to God’s calling and covenant with Abraham. In other words, Paul wants to prove his own ***continuity*** with God’s whole plan of salvation right from the beginning - from its ***Jewish*** Old Testament roots.

**Verse 5** explains more fully **verse 4**. If salvation through Christ is for ***“all who believe”***(4), then it is a terrible mistake ***not*** to put saving faith in Christ. ***So verse 5 bursts the hope of any other approach to righteousness - “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.”***

Of course, Paul doesn’t bother to restate what he has repeatedly pronounced in this letter - that this approach to law-keeping righteousness is ***impossible*** - **Romans 3:19-20** - ***“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”***

The path that remains then, if one is to be saved at all, is located along different lines altogether. And the main thrust of this string of related Old Testament texts is ***God has not placed salvation along lines that are hard to reach***. We don’t climb up to heaven to bring grace down. We don’t tunnel through the earth as though obstacles had to be removed.

No. ***“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”***(10:8). God has ***come*** to us. He has come ***near*** to us. He has spoken. Salvation is as near as the awareness of my own sin and my need of God’s mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul has said ***“Christ is the end of the law....”***(10:4). He is the One the law always anticipated and pointed to. The law manifests our ***need*** of a Savior.

This is surely the reason for Paul’s recitation of **Deuteronomy 30:11-14** - ***“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. [12] It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ [13] Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ [14] But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”***

What was the problem with the law? Was it a ***hard*** law? Were its demands ***unreasonable***? Surely Moses made it clear that such was not the case. Yet they didn’t ***keep*** the law. Why not? ***If the law wasn’t in itself un-keepable why did Israel fail to keep it so miserably and so repeatedly?*** The very nature of the law ***revealed*** something drastically wrong with the human condition. It stirred up human sin.

This is Paul's point. If the law was extremely difficult, then it's understandable people couldn't keep it. But if the law *isn't* unreasonable, if it isn't *in itself* too difficult to keep, then the problem must be with *us*. If the law *isn't* unreasonable our souls must be sick indeed. And this revelation of our proud, sick souls was God's plan all along with the law. It revealed our need of Jesus.

4) **JEW AND GENTILE ARE ALIKE IN THEIR NEED TO CALL UPON THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST**

**Romans 10:9-13** - "...because, if you confess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. [11] For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' [12] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. [13] For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

Very quickly, three facts stand out:

**First, *Jesus is Lord* (9).** He is distinct from those who are merely *teachers* or those who are *prophets*. The same title - "**Lord**" - is applied to Jesus is consistently used for **God** in the Old Testament. Getting this identity right is not optional. If Jesus is **Lord** then it follows that we are all **servants**. We do not study the deeds and words of Christ the way one studies geography. We must bow at His feet.

**Second, *Christ is risen from the dead* (9).** Our minds are immediately **pressed beyond this age into another kingdom**. The earthy theocracy of Israel is over. And God's work isn't extinguished by the end of our physical lives. Christ's resurrection is offered as proof of His unique role as the redeemer of mankind.

**Third, all must call upon the Lord because there is no distinction between peoples in Christ Jesus (12-13).** This is an obvious deduction from the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Such a Lord is not limited to any tribe or race. He is bigger than life itself. Everyone who calls upon such a Lord as this **will** be saved. And death itself can't snuff Christ's work out.