

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

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OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF CHRIST AND ITS OPPOSITE

Romans 10:14-21 - "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" [16] But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. [18] But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." [19] But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, "I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry." [20] Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me." [21] But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

The connection between this text and the verses immediately preceding seems simple enough. If there is a ***universal*** message of salvation for Jews and Gentiles - "**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**"(10:12) - and if the only condition of ***receiving*** salvation is ***believing*** - "**....Everyone who *believes* in him will not be put to shame**"(10:11) - and if the only ***action*** required is ***calling on the Lord*** - "**....everyone who *calls* on the name of the Lord will be saved**"(10:13) - then all people everywhere need to ***hear*** the message so they can ***call*** in faith. Hence, the obvious question to answer is ***how will people hear the message?***

That "***everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved***" sounds like a sound bite from a Billy Graham crusade. But that's not where Paul got his idea in **10:13**. He got it from the word of the Lord in the Old Testament. He got it from that great last day text that Peter referred to on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. He got it from **Joel 2:32** - "**And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved....**"

In other words, and this point will be very important to Paul's whole argument in our text, God's saving work among the Gentiles ***wasn't*** a maverick idea popping up in the random musings of Paul. The Jews were ***inexcusable*** for not seeing this coming from their own prophetic Scriptures. God's saving reach to the nations of the earth was a divine idea from square one. And Paul will reinforce this idea with more citations from the Old Testament.

Here are some key points from this text:

1) PAUL FORMS A CONNECTED CHAIN OF EVENTS NECESSARY FOR PEOPLE TO BE SAVED

Romans 10:14-15 - "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"

The important point here is Paul ***isn't*** just listing a number of ingredients - not even a list of very ***important*** ingredients. He repeats that verb "***how***" near the beginning of each question to ***lead*** us from step to step in his thinking. We're meant to see each question, not merely as a question, but as a ***link in a chain*** of logic. It is wonderful for people to ***call upon the Lord*** for salvation. But they can't call on someone without ***believing***. And they certainly won't ***believe*** unless they ***hear*** the message. And they can't ***hear*** the message unless somebody ***preaches or tells***. And how can anyone ***proclaim*** unless they are ***sent***?

If you take any one part of that process out, the whole process fails. You don't have to remove ***all*** the parts to bring salvation to naught. You only have to remove ***one***. How many links have to break in a chain before it no longer holds? This is the way Paul describes the advance of the gospel until Jesus returns.

And Paul has a ***purpose*** in this progression. Just as you can't pick which link in a chain is the most ***important***, each person advancing the gospel needs to see his or her role as vital and irreplaceable. It's not just the one who ***goes*** who fulfills God's plan. Those who ***send*** those who go are just as ***necessary*** and just as ***accountable*** for their faithfulness and their sacrifice.

In other words, God calls upon those who stay here and give and pray and send for the same measure of personal

sacrifice as those who leave home and family and go. Each link in the chain needs to be equally strong for the load to be lifted.

So there is no **opting out** of this process for the disciple of Jesus Christ. Paul's point is each Christian is in this chain. No one can say, "Missions just isn't my thing." If by that you mean you aren't **called to go** as a missionary, fine. But that only means you **are** called to send those who go. And you must send with the same passion and commitment as those who go. Opting out of the **missions chain** is disobedience, pure and simple.

2) FOR UNCONVERTED ISRAEL, ALL THE CONDITIONS FOR SALVATION WERE MET, EXCEPT ONE

Romans 10:16-20 - "But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?' [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. [18] But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.' [19] But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.' [20] Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, 'I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.'"

These verses are important because they point out Paul's intention in **verses 14-15**. While discussion boils over about the fate of those who have never heard the gospel, the context makes clear Paul's intention was never to discuss those who **haven't** heard, but those who **have** - particularly **Israel**. He clearly says it's not that they haven't **heard** the message, but that they haven't **obeyed** the message - **Romans 10:16a** - "But they have not all **obeyed** the gospel...."

Paul traces their spiritual blindness, not to **ignorance** but to **stubbornness**. They didn't want to **receive** the truth. Their unbelief wasn't **passive** unbelief, but **willful**. This shouldn't surprise us because Paul already hinted at this earlier in the **third verse** of this chapter - "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness"(3:10).

In the next four verses Paul seeks to remove two excuses for Israel's rebellious condition. **First** he will deal with the objection that they didn't **hear** the message. Then, **second**, he will deal with the objection that they didn't **understand** the message.

As far as **hearing** the message, Paul quotes from **Psalm 19:4** - "But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world'"(10:18). Certainly Paul knows Psalm 19 is dealing with God's general revelation in creation rather in the declaration of the gospel. But his point is he and other apostles have taken the gospel to all the regions of the Jews. Israel couldn't claim ignorance as an excuse. In this sense, the gospel was as available to the Jews as the revelation of creation was to the rest of mankind.

As far as **understanding** the message, Paul quotes from **Deuteronomy 32** - "But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.'"

This passages offers more fruit than one might pick at first glance. What Israel **knew** was God was going to act in such a way redemptively that He would include Gentiles. This meant God would save **by grace, apart from the law**. This was a wonderful pre-picturing of the coming of Christ and God's **supplying** the righteousness He **required**. All of this, says Paul, Israel had seen prophesied in her own Scriptures. Only **pride** kept her from coming to the truth.

The fact that Israel **understood** this is obvious from the passage. Paul quotes these Old Testament texts proving that Israel took the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's grace so seriously, she was "**jealous**" over what God was doing. That's a very important statement. It means Israel was aware that the Gentiles were receiving saving grace in a way they refused. That's **why** Israel was jealous. It was the **reality** of God's gracious, free work among the Gentiles that Israel found so irritating.

3) ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS WAS NOT THE RESULT OF DIVINE DECREE

Romans 10:20-21 - "Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, 'I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.' [21] But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'"

Again, Paul works with Israel's own prophetic Scriptures to show he isn't saying anything underhanded or unannounced. All had been revealed in the plan of God from long ago. Israel was rebelling against **God**, not **Paul**.

Of most interest at this point is Paul's quotation of **Isaiah 65:2**. Israel has resisted God. But what makes her resistance particularly offensive and blameworthy is she resisted and refused a God who was, all the while, holding His divine arms out (so to speak) to receive and embrace Israel.

A more opposite picture from some hidden eternal decree of election couldn't be found. God **invited**. God **waited**. God **pleaded**. Israel **refused**. Israel **shunned**. Israel **shut God out**. And if ever we needed to see this Old Testament text reflected in the life of our Lord, it's found in **Matthew 23:37** - "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!**"

Again, if the words of Jesus mean anything at all, there is only **one** unwilling party in this description. Jesus, God the Son, "**would**" and Israel "**would not**." We must never reverse the simple teaching of both Testaments.

4) **WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVEN'T HEARD THE GOSPEL?**

While this **isn't** the teaching of this part of Romans 10, it **is** the issue people want to discuss. The clearest place Paul seems to deal with it is **Romans 10:1-2** - "**Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. [2] For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.**"

Here is one place where Paul clearly talks about a very religious group of people. These Jews have a "**zeal for God**"(2). But for all of that they clearly aren't finding salvation. We know that because Paul tells us so. His deepest desire is that they "**may be saved**"(1). He prays for them precisely because he knows they **aren't** saved. Their zeal for God isn't a **saving** zeal.

And there's something about this kind of arguing we don't like. The problem we have in our minds is **creating a level playing field**. We want God to play fair with everyone. We want everyone to have the same opportunity. This appeals to our sense of fairness.

But it really doesn't work. And you don't have to go to the hidden regions of the earth to see why. Forget about the jungles for a minute. Think of your neighborhood - your own street. Sure, people probably have at least **heard** of Jesus Christ. But their situations are hardly equal. Some homes have a Christian dad to live out the life and love of Jesus in front of the children every day. Other kids have two parents who drink and fight and curse the saving name of Jesus that the kids heard once in some VBS. Don't tell me those kids all have the same chance to love our Lord.

Some homes take their families to church regularly. Others never go. Some homes are morally sane and clean. Others are dens of twisted sex and drugs. In our own church, some bring their families to church about 104 times a year - morning and night, with their kids plugged into mid-week children's ministries to boot. Others are skipping church to get to hockey practice. Some families come to church about 20 times a year. Some come at Christmas and Easter.

No. There's no way to make the playing field level. And you don't have to go as far to see it. All we know from our text is this. **If** there's another plan - some other way for those who haven't heard to be reached - either Paul doesn't **tell** us, or he doesn't **know** about it. There is nothing in this text to promote hope that perhaps the lost don't need to hear about Jesus Christ. So let's pray and send and give and go as though their future depends on it.