

The Stumbling Stone

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to open up your Bibles to Romans chapter 9.

! Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 9 verse 30, What shall we say then?

That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith, but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law?

Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. 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.

Father, we thank You for this word specifically, and we pray that You, by Your Spirit, would now open our eyes to see the truth of these handful of verses.

[1 : 38] I pray this in Christ's name. Amen. You guys take a seat, and you can remain seated for a little while this time. We've been walking through Romans, for those of you who don't know, who haven't been in a while or are new to us, we've been walking through Romans for quite a while now.

And it's taken us a while to get up to chapter 9, and now it's taken us a while to get through chapter 9. Chapter 9 is, of course, one of the more difficult passages in all of Romans.

And so as we have worked our way through it, we've had to take our time to move slowly and to make sure that we understand precisely what the Apostle Paul is saying. because his basic message in chapter 9 is not complicated.

It's straightforward and simple. But there are many details of the text that required some time. And then the basic meaning of the text itself brings up natural objections in our own hearts, in our own minds.

It causes us to wonder and to question, why would God do things this way? Why would God act in this way? But it's a good reminder for us that God is indeed, as we've been singing, He is mighty, He is great, He is powerful, and He is indeed the sovereign one who rules over all of history and over our lives.

[2 : 54] That's the reality that Romans 9 proclaims to us. In a lot of ways, though, we finished chapter 9 last week. You know, many of you probably know, of course, that when the Apostle Paul wrote Romans, He didn't put little verse markers or chapter markers in there.

These were added later on. The chapter divisions that we have today in our New Testament were added sometime in the 13th century. The verse divisions weren't added until after the Reformation in the 16th century.

And so the way that we have our New Testament divided up in chapters and verses, they don't always correspond precisely to the way that the flow of thought of the book is.

So if I were, if I had the power and the authority to move some of these around, which I don't because you'd have to change every Bible in the world, I would probably start chapter 10 where we're starting this morning with verse 30 of chapter 9.

Because here Paul is, he's turning a major corner in this letter. He has been, throughout chapter 9, answering a very specific question. In light of the fact that the people of Israel have, as a whole, rejected the Messiah, in light of the fact that they have not trusted in Jesus, does that mean that all of God's promises to them in the past, in what we call the Old Testament and throughout their history, does that mean that God's promises failed to come to pass for them?

[4 : 18] Does that mean that God's Word is untrustworthy? That all of the great promises that He's made now to us who are New Covenant believers, are they put in question? Are they put in doubt?

Because if His Word to Israel failed, why should we be able to have confidence in His Word and His promises to us, which we have seen innumerable in Romans, especially in chapter 8?

There's so many great, life-giving, encouraging promises in Romans chapter 8 that when you come to chapter 9 and the question is raised, has the Word of God failed?

It's an important question. And so Paul begins to answer that and he spends really all of Romans 9-11 answering that. But he gives the first part of his answer in chapter 9, which we have been dwelling on and meditating on for the past several weeks.

And his first answer to that question is, no, the Word of God has not failed. Because the promises that God made to the people of Israel, to the descendants of Abraham, were not given to every single physical descendant of Abraham.

[5 : 19] And he gives examples. God chose Isaac rather than Ishmael. God chose Jacob rather than Esau. And then he says, with the example of God's words to Moses and His words about Pharaoh, he says that God is sovereign in the distribution of mercy.

That God chooses those upon whom He gives His saving mercy. God decides those to whom the promises are intended to be fulfilled within. So the answer to the question, the first answer that he gives, has God's Word failed is no.

Because all the remnant of Israel, all the elect, all the chosen from within Israel, God has indeed saved. And they have believed in the Messiah.

It may be a small few. It may be a minority. But nevertheless, that is the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation to the people of Israel. Paul says, in no way has God's Word failed because God is sovereign and His promises have always been fulfilled in those whom He intends for them to be fulfilled within.

That's the first part of his answer to this great massive question about whether or not the Word of God has failed. But in the middle of chapter 9, sort of towards the end, we saw that Paul then begins to bring in the issue of the Gentiles.

[6 : 35] He mentions that God has called not only the remnant of Israel, but He's also called the Gentiles. And of course, at Paul's time and even in our time, when we look at the makeup of God's people, when we look at the makeup of the church as a whole, we see that it is predominantly Gentile.

I mean, overwhelmingly Gentile. So that some of you have probably never met a Jewish Christian. I've met a handful, but some of you may have never met a Jewish Christian. Why? Because in the age in which we live, God's people are predominantly composed of Gentiles.

God has now called from out of the Gentiles, just as He called from out of the physical descendants of Abraham, a remnant. But that brings up an important question. A question that will occupy Paul not only for this last paragraph of chapter 9, but throughout chapter 10, and even to a certain extent, chapter 11.

Why is this the case? What does this mean? He asks the question in verse 30 very clearly. In light of the fact that God is now calling Gentiles, and only a remnant of Israel, by His sovereign mercy, he says, what shall we say then?

What do we say in response to that? How? Paul is speaking as a Jewish believer in Christ, and he's asking the question, how should I respond to that? What do we say to that reality? How do we think about that?

[7 : 54] And then he makes it more clear because he asks a series of questions, contrasting questions about the Gentiles and Israel. Notice what he says. He says, shall we say that?

Is it the truth that? Is it the reality that? The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it. And then the other half of his question, but Israel, who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness, did not succeed in reaching or obtaining that law.

That's the real question that he's bringing up now. It's a similar question to the question he asked at the beginning of chapter 9. It flows out of that question. Why have Jews, by and large, rejected the Messiah and rejected the good news about him?

And now there's another component. And why have the Gentiles, by and large, or at least in large numbers, received the truth about the Messiah and the good news concerning him?

Why is that the case? So that now he's going to answer the question about the truthfulness and the faithfulness of God's word from another perspective.

[8 : 59] He's answered that question from the perspective of God's sovereign ruling over history and the doctrine of unconditional election. But now he's going to answer the question more from a human point of view.

In other words, he's going to give the answer in terms of what have the Gentiles done that Israel has not done? And what has Israel failed to do properly that has resulted in this situation? Now just asking that question in terms of what have they done?

What have they done differently from one another? Is a quick reminder for us before we even dive into what he says here. It's a quick reminder for us that the affirmation of God's sovereignty in all things, including his sovereignty over the salvation of men and women, the affirmation of that does not in any way contradict the reality that we have a responsibility to believe in the gospel.

It doesn't in any way, as we'll see as we travel through chapter 10, it doesn't in any way negate our responsibility as those who have believed from proclaiming that message to others.

Because as Paul will say, if nobody hears the gospel and nobody believes in the gospel, nobody will be saved. And nobody will hear the gospel if nobody proclaims the gospel.

[10 : 12] So the doctrine of God's sovereignty and salvation does not contradict man's responsibility both to believe the gospel and then to go out and proclaim the gospel to others so they might hear and believe those truths, though they may be difficult to reconcile in our minds and though at times we may be tempted to water down one in light of the other, the Apostle Paul is completely comfortable stating them both and letting them stand side by side.

He doesn't feel the need to lessen one truth or de-emphasize one in order to emphasize the other. He states them chapter right beside chapter right there next to each other by God's providence so that we would be able to see as we work our way through Romans that these two things while they may be difficult to reconcile in our minds they're both true and they should both be held to and clung to and cherished by the followers of Jesus.

So, what have the Gentiles done differently from the people of Israel by and large so that the Gentiles have obtained righteousness whereas Israel has apparently not?

What exactly have they done differently? Now, before we answer that question though, first we have to have a clear idea in our minds of what Paul means by righteousness.

When he says that the Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, what does he mean there by righteousness? He doesn't mean goodness in a more general sense.

[11 : 41] As we saw in chapter 2 though Paul affirms throughout chapters 1, 2, and 3 the total depravity of man. He affirms that we are utterly sinful to our core. Nevertheless, he also recognizes that just on a human level in terms of the way that we relate to other people in terms of relative comparisons between one group of people and another group of people or one individual and another individual, he recognizes that even the Gentiles at times in that respect obey the law of God that is engraven upon all of our hearts.

Even the Gentiles, he says, at times obey God's word that they know just from nature and from being made in His image. Even they do. Not truly from the heart so that we couldn't say that they truly obey God from the heart that is for His glory.

But just on a human level, Paul's able to look and say, not all Gentiles are murderers. Not all Gentiles are thieves. And so at least on the surface level we could say that they're relative to others, they're good.

And we use the language in that way. Sometimes we'll say, well, He's just a good old boy or He's a good guy or that's a good man. And we don't mean that He's good in the sense if He has earned God's favor or He can get into heaven on the basis of His goodness.

We just mean that relatively in comparison to other people in the world. This guy's a pretty good guy. This guy's a scoundrel over here because he's not a very good guy. We all understand that. Paul acknowledges that.

[13 : 05] But when we come now to the righteousness language, that's not what Paul is talking about. When he says the Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, he's not saying there wasn't anybody among the nations that was a pretty good person relative to others.

What he means here by righteousness is a right standing before God on judgment day. That's what he means. He means to be declared to be righteous in God's sight.

Not just a good guy but actually righteous in the sight of a holy God. That's what he means. And he says that the Gentiles they weren't even pursuing that.

They weren't even going after that. That's not even a thought in their minds. They don't even know the true God much less are they making the name of their life so that at the end of it all they might be in his court in his estimation and in his sight declared to be righteous.

That's not even in their minds Paul says. And yet he says we face a situation in which those who did not pursue righteousness and had no interest in a right standing before God we face the reality that today many many Gentiles he said have obtained righteousness.

[14 : 21] They have attained or obtained it. It's theirs. It now belongs to them and then he clarifies and he makes sure that we understand it is a righteousness that is by faith. The Gentiles because of their faith in Jesus many of them now have been declared righteous by God in his sight.

That's the teaching that takes up the first half of the book of Romans. We spent so many months talking about how does a person get right with God and over and over Paul's answer and our answer to that question was we get right with God only by faith in Christ.

We are justified that is we are declared righteous in God's sight by faith in the Messiah. And Paul says Gentiles who weren't even looking for that heard the gospel responded to the gospel and now by faith they have attained a righteous standing before God.

What a miracle Paul says. But there is a contrast. What did Israel fail to do so that they lack that? It's interesting because when you read through these verses and sometimes sometimes when we read things quickly and this is one of the reasons that we work so slowly through books of the Bible in here more quickly in Sunday school but more slowly here is because sometimes when we read too quickly through a passage we read it in the way that we expect it to be worded.

Have any of you ever seen one of those things where somebody will give you a paragraph or a sentence to read and it's missing all the vowels in it or you only all the words are scrambled in the middle but they have the first letter of the word and the last letter of the word and miraculously somehow you can still read it because your brain just kind of puts together what ought to be there because you're so used to reading certain words now if it's a long unfamiliar word it won't key into your brain you have to sit and stare at it for a while but if it's just normal common everyday words you'll be able to read it whether it's missing vowels or the letters are scrambled in the middle so long as the beginning and ending of the word is right you just kind of fill it in with your brain and you can do that fairly rapidly if you're an avid reader well sometimes we do that when we approach the Bible sometimes we're moving through it so quickly that we read it in the way that we expect it to be written but when we slow down we recognize that it's not exactly written in the way that we would expect and that's the case here in these verses what you would expect it to say or at least what I expected it to say would be something like this alright that the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it but that Israel who did pursue righteousness did not obtain righteousness interestingly enough that's not at all what the text says it's not the text does not say that Israel pursued righteousness the text says that Israel pursued and the ESV gives a little bit of interpretation here

[17:19] I want to give it to you more literally the text says that Israel pursued a law of righteousness and that they did not succeed in obtaining the law or that law so it's he doesn't say Israel was seeking righteousness while the Gentiles weren't and Israel obtained righteousness while the Gentiles failed to attain righteousness that's not what he says Israel was pursuing a law of righteousness and they did not succeed in reaching that law all of this language is important for us to recognize Paul is using throughout most of this paragraph he's using a racing metaphor we might miss it because we don't recognize the languages being clear racing language but the words that he uses here are the words that would have been used in the ancient world in Greek to describe a foot race normally the issue of pursuing you pursue the end you pursue the goal you pursue the finish line the issue of attaining or obtaining is getting there and receiving the prize this is all this is all very clear language it indicates that Paul is sort of using an analogy of a race and he's saying that the Gentiles weren't even in the race they didn't know there was a race going on they just all of a sudden found themselves standing there the ribbons cut they run through the ribbon they don't run and bam they get the prize they got righteousness and he says

Israel was running in a race they were pursuing something they didn't obtain what they were pursuing but let's consider for a moment precisely what it is that they are pursuing a law of righteousness that's not an altogether clear phrase which is why some translations like the ESV do a little bit of interpreting here which I'd prefer they not do I'd prefer just get it literally and we figure it out ourselves they do a little bit of interpreting here to sort of direct us and help us figure out what does he mean by a law of righteousness and I think if I were paraphrasing this here then I would probably say something like they were pursuing a law that points toward righteousness they were pursuing a law that shows where righteousness is to be found or that points to the location of righteousness that's what he means they were pursuing a law which would be the Torah the first five books of the Old Testament are called by the Jewish people the Torah many of you know that it's the foundation of their faith it is the foundation even of our faith and they were pursuing the Torah they were pursuing the law but they were pursuing it as a law that points to how how to actually obtain righteousness it shows you where righteousness is located and yet they did not obtain to that law which I take to mean they did not see where the law was pointing the law was directing them it was directing them it was pointing in a particular direction go here look there and even though they were pursuing it they didn't see the signposts they missed the markers it's as if they started at the starting line in the right place but they didn't follow the course of the race the course was mapped out clearly the Torah shows the law shows the law points ahead and yet they didn't see the race markers they didn't see them and they ran off the course and now they're out in the middle of nowhere because they thought they knew the way and they didn't know the way and they didn't pay close enough attention to the signs whereas the

Gentiles on the other hand who didn't even enter the race are suddenly standing at the finish line with the winner's crown upon their heads it's a shocking turn of events but it's important for us I think to recognize and to notice that Paul makes this shift in language from what the Gentiles were pursuing to what Israel was pursuing because it helps us to better understand Paul's argument as it moves ahead through chapter 10 the problem was not that Israel pursued the law Paul tells us in chapter 7 the law is holy and righteous and good the problem was not that the people of Israel loved the law David says throughout the Psalms oh how I love your law that wasn't the issue it wasn't the issue at all the issue is that this law that was pointing them in the right direction they pursued in the wrong way and so they misunderstood what it was trying to tell them to do that's exactly what Paul says he asks a question in verse 32 why that is why though pursuing the law that points to righteousness why did they not reach that to which the law was pointing they didn't reach the law why and his answer is very clear he says because they did not pursue it by faith but as if it were based on works you see some people are confused some people entertain the notion that there is one way of salvation prescribed for the people of

Israel under the old covenant and then there is a different a new way of salvation prescribed for believers under the new covenant but that's not the case at all in fact the book of Romans would make absolutely no sense if that were the case because throughout those chapters in the first half of the book in which Paul is defending the doctrine of justification by faith alone he continually goes back to the law back to other portions of the Old Testament to prove his case he cites the two most well known figures of the nation of Israel Abraham the father of Israel and David the great king of Israel he cites them as prime examples of chapter four of those who were justified by faith not by works of the law and so the way of salvation or the way to get right with God has always been by faith in the promises of God that that focus upon the Messiah that has always been the way of salvation yes today we have a clearer picture of what those promises are yes today under the new covenant we know more about the promised seed of Abraham in whom

Abraham and David trusted sure we know more about that but nevertheless the object of faith was the same and the way of salvation faith in the promises of God was the same under the old covenant as it is under the new covenant and Paul says the problem with the people of Israel and the reason they find themselves cut off and estranged now is because for all of their zeal and love for God's law they did not recognize the one to whom the law was pointing they failed to pursue the law by faith and because they pursued the law as if it were merely a list of demands to follow they did not see the way to righteousness they didn't see the one to whom it was pointing that's what he says as he wraps up this paragraph!

[24 : 29] he says in verse 32 why? because they did not pursue it by faith but as if it were by works and then he proves his case by quoting from Isaiah but what's interesting is he shifts his focus in this quotation from Isaiah he shifts his focus from faith by itself to the object of faith now he's talking about belief in general now he gets more specific and he makes sure that we understand that the faith that they did not exercise was faith in Christ verse 33 or into verse 32 and then verse 33 he says they have stumbled over the stumbling stone that's another way of saying they didn't pursue it by faith they stumbled over the stumbling stone 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 Paul in quoting the prophet Isaiah is saying that the problem of the people of Israel is that as they were running the race not only did they get off track but they tripped over the signposts they stumbled and they fell and they stumbled over the one to whom the law was pointing all along they did not believe in this one whoever believes in him will not be put to shame which is another way of saying whoever believes in him will not be judged indeed he will be declared righteous he will be justified by

God and the problem of Israel the reason why they are estranged and cut off yes from one perspective is because of God's sovereign will but from our perspective what we must say to all those outside of Christ not just the Jewish people what we must say is the problem is that you have failed to believe in Christ you have failed to see the one about whom God was testifying all along all the way back in Genesis chapter 3 when he promised a seed of the woman who would defeat the works of the serpent himself through Abraham where the seed promise continues and David where the seed promise continues the entire Old Testament is pointing us and was pointing the people of Israel to look in and trust in the Messiah and if they had been doing that when he came on the scene they would have recognized him and they would have trusted in him but when he came on the scene they were not doing that you ever wonder why Jesus harshest words are for the

Jewish religious leadership he reserves his harshest words words that today we would say are politically incorrect he's just being mean he's not being nice if I if I said the kinds of things about people that I regard to be false teachers if I said the kinds of things that Jesus did some of you would think I get what he's saying but that's kind of rude who calls a guy a dog who says that who calls people he disagrees with a snake well Jesus does that's who does that and he does that because of all the people these religious leaders should have been hoping in him and trusted in him when he came upon the scene and yet they rejected him and in his place they embraced a list of rules they put their hope in their own ability to perform rather than Christ's ability to take their place and so they stumbled over the stumbling stone you see

Paul is telling us here that we don't get right with God by pursuing obedience to a list of rules we get right with God by putting our trust in one who has already perfectly obeyed those rules he's saying that we cannot be saved by our own efforts that we must be saved by faith in one who has already done all that we should do justification getting right with God salvation has been is and always will be simply by faith in Christ and all that he has accomplished for us and in our place so that yes yes from one perspective the people of Israel are cut off because of God's electing purposes but yes from another perspective the people of Israel are cut off because they stumbled over the stumbling stone and they didn't trust in the only one who could save them from their sins and that is true about every person you know who is outside of

Christ there is nobody that you know who has not yet trusted in Christ about whom you can have any confidence in the present that if they were to die now that they would be safe in God's arms there's nobody you know outside of Christ that you can have confidence like that for and neither can you have confidence for yourself if you have not trusted in him you cannot if you stumble over the stumbling stone you have no hope there is no life outside of him there is no right standing before God outside of Jesus you know I think Paul uses this racing language but there might be another metaphor that I think could be helpful for us to understand exactly what he's saying about Israel and what he says to us as well imagine if you will that this goal towards which we should all be seeking that is righteousness in God's eyes imagine that that goal is at the top of an unreachable tower it's staggeringly high it goes past the clouds it's staggeringly high and we can never reach it on our own and yet there is a ladder attached to the tower and every rung on the ladder is another command from the

[30 : 37] Torah every one of them but if you had the fittest man in the world the tower is too tall he would never make it and Paul is in essence saying that Israel was climbing the tower and yet they didn't recognize that all along not only was there command on every rung of the ladder there was also another word you can't do this look to the one who already has you can't make it trust in the one who can take you there what Israel missed and what we often miss as we try to work our way up to righteousness before God is that there's an arrow on the ladder pointing right next to it to an elevator that takes us all the way up with no effort of our own merely trusting builder the elevator can get us there and what we so often miss in our effort is that

Christ has already done everything necessary there is within the fallen human heart this desire to to get some credit for our accomplishments to be able to claim things as our own and that will not work when it comes to getting right with God God only saves by faith in Jesus because all the glory goes to Jesus that's how he saves sinners and no amount of effort by the most moral person in the world will ever get them to the top of that tower no amount of effort will help them to arrive at the finish line but faith in Jesus take them immediately immediately to the finish line and that's not something we need to remember only for ourselves I spent a lot of time this week thinking about this praying about this considering the fact that so many times as parents we know in our minds we know that we need to point kids to

Christ we need to point them to the gospel but so often we just keep putting them in front of the ladder and saying climb climb the ladder go why are you still doing this can't you get this right just do what you're supposed to do and climb the ladder and that makes sense when they're little it makes sense because they've got to learn the rules to know that they've broken the rules and they can't keep the rules so they'll trust in one who has that makes sense when they're little but when they arrive at a place to where they know that they're a law breaker it does no good to simply and only put before them rules and keep saying climb I think so often as parents we know that for ourselves righteousness can only be obtained by faith but somehow we convince ourselves that if we will do things this way if we will follow this certain path there is this underlying feeling that our kids will be okay and they'll be alright and they won't be if they don't have faith in Jesus they won't be so despite all the things that we aim at despite all the virtue that we try to cultivate in our children despite all the ways in which we try to get them to walk along the right path the reality is if we don't show them in the midst of teaching them those rules that those rules are pointing them to

Christ and if we don't our children we do that with other members of our family we do that with lost people at work and we expect them and we get angry with them when they can't climb a ladder that we couldn't climb we wonder why why have they not yet embraced Christ it may simply be that we never put all of our effort into pointing them to Christ we just kept pointing!

remains true for you for your children for your lost grandchildren or your lost brother or sister or your lost spouse it remains true in the midst of all of that that they will only be right with God when they lay down their own efforts and trust in Christ alone for their justification let's pray