

## Jesus: The End of Human Trying

### Romans 9:30-10:4

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*"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." Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 9:30-10:4 ESV)*

This is a longer section of Romans and frankly includes a few portions which require some dense reading and thinking to process. On behalf of our church I have tried to wade through it. You are all welcome to do the same on your own. I'll touch on some of it, but for clarity's sake, let me start by telling you what I believe Paul is saying here. Where he is going in all these verses culminates in 10:4, *"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."* Jesus is the end of all our attempts to be righteous before God by the Old Testament law or any other religious efforts. He is the end of all that, note, *for those who believe in Christ*. He ends our *trying* to save ourselves.

He also ends our *tripping*. Israel tripped and stumbled over Jesus because their eye was on the law and their own self-righteousness instead of on Jesus and his righteousness. Believe in Jesus and you won't stumble by *not* seeing him. Let's see this text through that lens of no more religious trying, no more self-righteous tripping.

#### No More Trying

*"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." (Romans 9:30-32)*

Paul uses these two terms, *"Israel"* and *"Gentiles,"* in a very broad way. By *"Israel,"* he doesn't mean all Israelites, as many Jews received Christ as Savior, Paul included. But broadly speaking, the Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah. Their reaction to Jesus, the Apostles, the church, and Paul's ministry allow Paul to speak generally of the Jews' rejection of Jesus and the New Testament gospel.

Not much has changed in 19 centuries. Our own Wes & Lori Taber are missionaries to the Jewish community with an organization called Life in Messiah. While there are many Jews and whole movements of Messianic Jews who practice a New Testament faith, the vast majority of Jews today do not believe, and the state of Israel is largely secular, even atheistic.

"Gentiles" is also descriptive in a general sense. There are many, many Gentiles who do not believe in Christ. Indeed, the vast majority do not. But God has opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles and many, many more Gentiles have become Christians than Jews. That's how he begins, in astonishment at the irony.

The Gentiles who did not pursue right standing before the one true God have attained it. How? *By faith*. A righteousness that is by faith. Here is the tragic irony. Israel tried to attain it, but they haven't. Why? They tried to attain in by their own religious efforts. They tried to be righteous by obeying the Mosaic Old Testament law. How'd that work for them? Terrible. Why? No sinner can come close. He emphasizes the fatal flaw in verse 32, Why? *"Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."*

"Works" here is religious obedience to the law as merit or saving favor with God. Christians are to obey the law, but we don't do it because we think it saves us, we do so in response to God saving us. *The Jews saving principle was their obedience*. Being good enough. Doing enough. He is speaking to Israelite obedience to Old Testament law, but the principle applies to anyone who tries to work their way to God.

This is the average person-on-the-street's default answer to the question, *"Do you think you are going to heaven?"*

*"Yes, I suppose."*

*"Why?"*

*"I've lived a good life, you know. Better than some people."* Right here in Romans 9, Paul says, that dog won't hunt. That approach won't save.

All our trying and all our obeying don't forgive our sins and don't make us righteous before God.

### ***If God is sovereign, am I responsible?***

If you are tracking with the big picture of Romans, this whole section may sound confusing coming off what Paul has said about God's sovereignty in salvation. If God is sovereign, so what if I try? If I succeed or if I fail, it doesn't matter because in the end God is sovereign. That's just plain wrong. We have to take God's Word as a whole and yes, Paul says it clearly that God is sovereign AND that Israel is responsible for their rejection of Jesus.

We think it has to be one or the other. Some scholars throw their hands up and declare Paul was mistaken or duplicitous. No. Underlying all this is the Holy Spirit inspiring Paul to write what he did.

See also that Paul doesn't say these unbelieving Jews are lost because they aren't elect. They aren't saved because they reject Jesus as Messiah and Savior.

*"Election alone accounts for the saved, but non-election does not account for the lost...We are responsible for our rejection of the gospel, but we are not responsible for our acceptance of it. That is the result of the electing grace of God."* (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)<sup>1</sup>

So, which is it? Is God sovereign or are we responsible? The right answer is both are true. *How Pastor Steve?* I don't exactly know. I can hardly understand my own thoughts much less understand the mind of the infinite God.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, p. 285.

Should we be surprised that there are aspects of an infinite God beyond our understanding? God says both are true. God is sovereign and we are responsible for the decisions and directions of our lives. While we can't understand it, we can see the wisdom and goodness in it. Take away God's sovereignty and man is contributing to his own salvation. Take away our responsibility and then all is fatalistic and nothing I do matters.

Best is both sovereignty and responsibility are true and someday in glory we may see more clearly how.

### ***But what if I am sincerely trying?***

Here is another fallacy so common in our culture. Sincerity is the important thing. Listen to Paul, "*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.*" (Romans 10:1) As a side note, since we are coming off Romans 8 and 9 dealing with God's sovereignty in salvation, did you hear what Paul said here? He is praying to God for Jews to be saved. What? Why? Here is another mistaken understanding of God's sovereignty that says, *why pray? They are either elect or not.* How can Paul say only the elect are saved in chapter 9 and start chapter 10 with his fervent prayer for Jews to be saved? Once again, is Paul just talking out of both sides of his mouth?

No. He understood God's sovereignty in salvation better than any of us and it compelled him to pray, to go into synagogues and preach, to suffer beatings and persecution and to labor on. Properly understood, election is a motivation to pray as God has ordained the end as well as the means. Paul knew prayer is a means by which God's purposes are accomplished. So, mother and father of a prodigal, election means no matter how far away from God your child is, he or she is not too far gone for God. Keep praying. Husband or wife of an unbeliever, no matter how hard that heart is to the things of God, keep praying as it's not too hard for an all-sovereign God to touch, soften, and save.

I think even those who oppose God's sovereignty in salvation pray that God would save their kids and loved ones. They are being inconsistent, not Paul. Paul prayed. So must we.

*"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."* (Romans 10:2-3)

But what about sincerity in religious practice? We live in a culture where this is very much celebrated. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it sincerely and fervently. That will draw applause on any TV talk show. This allows celebrities in particular to be highly praised for their scientology or new age or worship of flowers or whatever. *Look at them, they are so sincere. Since all roads lead to God who cares which road you take as long as its meaningful to you?* That is the spirit of the age.

Paul says sincerity is great except when you are sincerely wrong. The Jews have a zeal for God. Paul knew this well as he was in the thick of it most of his life. He tells his own story in other places and summarizes his life as being *a Pharisee of the Pharisees* until the day he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He realized in that moment that he had zeal and sincerity, but that the whole superstructure of his faith was built on a wrong truth. He was zealous but zealously wrong.

*"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."* (Romans 10:2) Not according to truth as revealed in Jesus and the gospel.

"For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." (Romans 10:3) Judaism, for all its privileges, without Jesus doesn't save. The same is true for any religion no matter how hard you try. Without Jesus there is no salvation.

Religions say, *Do more. Try harder. Earn it.* Of course, what's missing is what the New Testament emphasizes, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23) "*None is righteous, no, not one.*" (Romans 3:10) Consider for a moment all the religions and billions of people over centuries who have walked steps on their knees, and washed in the Ganges, and made pilgrimages and done philanthropy and billions of other attempts to be right before God. Absolutely sincere. Zealous. Earnest. Yet without Jesus' righteousness given to us by faith, we are not righteous, no not one.

Go with me in your mind to the Western wall in Jerusalem.



It is sometimes called the wailing wall. There you will see incredible Jewish religious fervor and dedication. I have stood there and watched young and old read and recite over and over the Old Testament Scriptures. They rock back and forth as a time-tested means of staying focused. They have done this for century upon century. Earnestly seeking the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are zealous, but without knowledge of the true gospel and Savior Jesus. They are trying! Desperately trying.

But Christ is the *telos* of the law. Christ is the end of trying to construct a way to God built upon human good works and righteousness. Belief in Christ as Savior and Lord brings to an end the sinner's futile quest for right standing before God based on his own effort.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 9-16*, p. 67.

How about you today? Are you religious? Or in more acceptable terms today, are you *spiritual*? How are you going about attaining right moral standing before a holy God? Are you sincere? Probably. Are you laboring hard? Possibly. But is your righteousness Christ's perfect righteousness granted by your personal faith in him? Your trying won't save you, but faith in Jesus will. Trust fully in him today.

### **No More Tripping**

*"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."* (Romans 9:32-33)

This is an interesting illustration of Israel's failure. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. Who is the stumbling stone? Jesus is. How did Israel stumble? Just like we stumble. We trip when our eyes are on something else. Think of all the people tripping and falling these days as they walk staring at their phones.

One of the funniest things I've ever seen was years ago at my sister's graduation from university. It was at the football stadium and we were in the stands. All the graduates filled the field sitting on chairs which were all set up on a very low platform. Huge class. They went up to get their diploma by filing out the back, toward the stands, and then around to the platform. Every graduate would stand up, turn around, begin walking but look up to see family waving in the stands. This meant they also didn't realize the small step down to the field. We watched at graduate after graduate missed the step. They didn't fall and nobody was hurt, but each one by the hundreds tripped.

The younger immature version of me was howling in laughter. The university staff realized what was happening and stationed two professors at the step to warn the graduates. They warned hundreds of graduates until after the last one passed, then they both turned, looked up to the stands, and tripped on the very step they had warned so many others about. We lost it, again in that shameful and immature way. Today I'm sure I wouldn't even crack a smile....

Israel was given so much spiritual privilege and revelation, yet they missed the step. They missed the stone, like those two professors who had all the knowledge they needed, yet they themselves stumbled. Israel's eyes were on the law, and through the law, on their own sense of privilege and righteousness. With their attention on their efforts, their traditions, their righteousness, they missed Jesus. They still do to this day. Jesus is the stone of offense. Unless you see him, he is the stumbling stone.

What are your eyes on? What are your hopes on? The distractions are endless, religious, material, relational, cultural, sexual, educational, whatever. People stumble over Jesus when they don't see and savor him for who he is, Son of God and Savior for all who trust in Him.

### **Self-righteousness is Eternally Deadly**

We don't have to be practicing Jews to stumble over Jesus. This is the irony Paul makes is that the very people group that prided themselves on their knowledge of Scripture and fastidious following of the law of God are the very people most likely to miss Jesus and eternal life.

Why? It's not sin that makes it hard to believe in Jesus. No. Sinners loved Jesus in the gospels. By that I mean people who readily admitted their sin from the prostitutes to Zacchaeus to Cornelius and others. Self-acknowledged sinners flocked to Jesus.

And ethnicity doesn't make it hard! The gospel is for the Jew and the Gentile. It no longer matters if you have Abraham's DNA or not. No. Ethnicity is no barrier to belief and the Gentiles were flocking and still are flocking into the kingdom of God.

So, what makes it so hard? Self-righteousness, which is another way of saying, human pride.

Who hated Jesus the most? Those most confident in their own righteousness. The Pharisees. They were the most zealous of all, yet zealously wrong.

Dear friend, I'm not questioning your sincerity or your zeal. I'm not questioning the good things you've done. I'm pointing out that those won't save you. If they couldn't save Abraham or Moses or Mary Magdalene, they won't save you. Don't stumble over this.

I'm also speaking to a room with a huge percentage of people who grew up in spiritual privilege. You've known these things your whole life. This should be a blessing, but could it be a curse? Like the Jews, could all those years of Sunday School or Christian School or VBS or family devotions blinded you instead of enlightened you? How? By subtly creating a faith structure not built on Jesus but on your faith or family legacy. On traditions of men instead of the gospel of Christ. Make sure Jesus isn't a stone of stumbling but the rock upon which your faith is truly built.

Look to Jesus. Don't stumble, put the foot of your faith completely on his death for your sin. Stand on his offer of salvation to all who believe. Reaffirm today, even now, with a quiet prayer, *Only you Jesus. Not me. Nothing about me. All you.*

*"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."* (Romans 10:4)

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