

## **Romans 9:30-10:13**

### **Introduction**

In the previous section, Paul continued to discuss God's elective purposes using the image of a potter and clay. In order to make His riches known to some (objects of his mercy), God was patient even toward those who, because of their rebellion, were objects of His wrath. In the opening of Hosea God called Israel "not my people" but later spoke of a time when Israel would once again be called "my people." It is crucial to notice that *God* would change the status of "not my people/not my beloved" *after* his punishment to "my people/my beloved." God's punishment for rebellion precedes his reclaiming them back to favored status. Paul used this same text to show that Hosea pointed to the "now" (3:21) days of Messiah when Christ-following Gentiles who had previously been "not my (God's) people" would be "my (God's) people." During Israel's previous times of rebellion, God always saved a remnant through which the promises would be fulfilled. During Paul's day when most in Israel were rejecting Jesus, God was again working through a remnant in Israel to fulfill His promises of blessing and redeeming rebellious Israel to Himself.

In this section, the nationalistic Jewish teacher (NJT) questioned how Israel who pursued God's righteousness failed to gain it and Gentiles who didn't even want God's righteousness attained it. In the metaphor of a race Paul explained that in Israel's desire for covenant relationship with God they pursued the wrong thing (Torah). And on top of that, God played a role in their misguided pursuit by throwing a rock onto the track so that they would stumble.

### **Gentiles, Not Israel, Have The Prize?: 9:30-33**

The image of these verses is that of a race. "Righteousness" (covenant relationship) is the key term here. It is found three times in the Greek text within a four-word span. The point at issue is the basis for righteousness. The NJT questioned the notion that Gentiles, who weren't even running after covenant relationship with God (righteousness) had the prize dropped in their lap (9:30a). Paul responded by identifying the basis of the Gentile's relationship with God (9:30b). They had received God's righteousness "out of (God's) faithfulness" (NRSV's "through faith"). For a discussion of this understanding of "faith" refer back to the discussion of "faith" in the document that covers 3:21-31.

The debate here is not whether someone should have faith in God or faith in Torah. Israel was not struggling with whether or not to put trust in Torah to the exclusion of trusting in God. They had put their trust in both. This is also not about faith versus works. The Greek text is contrasting righteousness that comes "out of Torah" with that which comes "out of God's faithfulness" as seen in the Christ event.

The NJT responded (9:31) by questioning how Israel, who diligently pursued God's righteousness through Torah's teachings could not have succeeded in fulfilling their pursuit. The "Why (not)?" of verse 32 could be either Paul or the NJT. The following is Paul's response. It is because they did not pursue it on the basis of the faithfulness of God. (9:32's "did not strive for it on the basis of faith"). Israel could never have attained covenant relationship through the pursuit of Torah ("succeed in fulfilling

law”), because of the weakness of the flesh (8:3-4). This is the impossible struggle Paul portrayed in 7:14-20. Such a pursuit only leads to sin and death. It has no power to forgive and therefore no ability to provide covenant relationship with God. This was Israel’s misguided understanding of Torah. Paul was not attacking a passion for following the teachings of Torah. He was attacking the thought that a focus on the deeds of Torah was the path to covenant relationship with God. In effect, Paul claims, Israel was confidently running a race in which the prize had already been awarded to a non-competitor in the stands. Not only that, Israel’s race was one in which they were harmed simply by running it.

The quotation found in 9:33 is a combination of Isa. 28:26 and 8:14. The targum (Aramaic translation) of Isaiah had already given Isa. 28:26 a Messianic interpretation. So, its Messianic use by Paul was not new. “I am laying in Zion” is a proclamation that God has placed Jesus Messiah in the midst of Israel as an act of divine purpose. The word translated “stumble” (in Greek, *skandalon*—from which we get the English, “scandal”) not only carries the idea of stumbling, it also carries the idea of something being offensive or repulsive. The idea of a crucified Messiah was repulsive to the Jewish teacher. The gospel was like a rock that God threw in the middle of the track causing Israel to be repulsed and to stumble. But God’s throwing that rock was an act of divine grace: it made them fall on their face and kept them from running any longer in a race that itself was harmful to them. God tripped them in order to keep them from running off a cliff. As will be seen later this was so that Gentiles could be drawn to God.

### **Zeal Without Understanding: 10:1-4**

Paul’s passion for Israel to embrace Jesus Messiah is seen again in the opening of this chapter as it was in the opening of chapter 9. Israel had been described as his brother/sisters in the flesh in 9:3. Here Paul referred to the Gentiles as his brother/sisters.

Like a witness in a courtroom, Paul could bear witness to the state of Israel because he had been where many still were in their understanding of God’s righteousness. The importance of the word translated “zeal” in Paul’s argument can be seen in that this word is not found in secular Greek. It was used exclusively to speak of Jewish piety. There are a number of references in Jewish literature about the zeal of Jewish heroes. Notice the words concerning Phinehas (Numbers 25) in Sirach 45:23-24.

“Phinehas son of Eleazar ranks third in glory for being zealous in the fear of the Lord and standing firm, when the people turned away, in the noble courage of his soul; and he made atonement for Israel. Therefore a covenant of friendship was established with him that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people that he and his descendants should have the dignity of the priesthood for ever.

Zeal was used of those who took up the sword to maintain Israel’s separateness from the pagan world. It was also used of those who fought against evil, as in the case of Elijah.

“Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch. He brought a famine upon them, and by his zeal he made them few in number. By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours (Sir. 48:1-2)?”

The problem was that Israel’s zeal was not based on a correct understanding of the covenant-keeping activity (righteousness) of God. Again, verse 3 is about God’s righteousness rather than the “righteousness that comes from God.” The phrase, “that comes from” is not in the Greek text. The Greek literally reads, “For being ignorant of God righteousness, ... they did not submit to the righteousness of God.”

The word “own” in verse three is very important. It speaks of something that is peculiar to something or someone to the exclusion of others. In this context it speaks of Israel pursuing their own peculiar righteousness to the exclusion of Gentiles. Israel’s passion for their understanding of righteousness is seen in the word “seeking.” Israel was deliberate and intentional in its pursuit of righteousness through strict observance of Torah, Sabbath observance, practice of circumcision, following food laws, etc., those things that set them apart from others. Paul’s point is that covenant relationship comes through God’s saving act in Jesus Messiah and is for all people. It is not based on doing the deeds of Torah. God’s righteous action in Jesus demonstrates both the futility and misguidedness of anyone or any group trying to claim proper relationship with God through anything other than *God’s* own action. To make God’s welcome apply only to a particular group denies the impartiality of God’s covenant; to make it apply only to those who “do” some list of actions denies the universality of God’s covenant. The covenant promise to Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus, is *unilateral, unconditional, and universal*.

Christ is the fulfillment or finish line of the law. It is through Jesus Messiah that God fulfilled his covenant promise to Abraham and Israel. Although Torah pointed toward Jesus, the Jewish teacher could not see it.

This is not a proclamation that Torah was thrown out the window. Too many positive statements about Torah have been stated in Romans (3:31; 7:12,16; 8:4; 9:31) for this to be Paul’s meaning. This is not about switching from one set of law codes to another. As stated earlier, this is about how one reads and understands the intent of Torah. Righteousness is found in God’s faithfulness not in one’s ability to perform the works of Torah. Those who experience the blessings of covenant relationship are those who trust in God’s saving act rather than trusting in anything else.

### **Righteousness from Law vs Righteousness from faithfulness: 10:5-13**

The NJT brought up Moses’ statement in Lev. 18:5 (10:5) as a proof text for his position. This text had been given much attention in Jewish writings prior to Paul’s time and was the NJT’s understanding of living within the covenant. He believed life with God was found through doing the deeds of Torah. This should not be taken as proof that Moses taught a righteousness based on Torah observance.

As has been seen throughout this study, the opening statement in verse 6 should be understood to read, “But the covenant relationship (“righteousness”) based on God’s

faithfulness (NRSV's "comes from faith") says it like this."<sup>1</sup> The phrase, "Do not say in your heart," is very similar to Deut. 8:17 and 9:4 ("do not say to yourself") where Israel was warned not to presume that they had defeated armies because of their own power. Paul used this phrase in an attempt to move the NJT from his presumption that Israel could find covenant relationship with God through searching out and doing the deeds of Torah.

The following quote is from Deut. 30:12-14. At the end of Moses' discussion of the blessings and curses in Deut. 28-29 is a discussion of God's uprooting of Israel from the land for following after other gods. Then in chapter 30 Moses discussed the faithfulness of God toward Israel if they were to be dispersed from the land. There would be a time of restoration when God would circumcise their hearts so that they would love God from their inmost being and they would live obedient lives. In that time of restoration Israel would not have to go to heaven or cross the sea in order to know and obey Torah. God would place the intent and purpose of Torah in Israel's mouth and heart. When this time came, it would signal the end of the Exile and its time of curses. The time of Exile would end by God's unilateral action of providing the ability, knowledge, and incentive to obey by directly working on Israel's hearts.

The importance of this text can be seen in that it is found in other Jewish writings (i.e. Baruch 3:29-30; Philo, *Post* 84-85; *Targum Neofiti* on Deuteronomy 30)<sup>2</sup> and even on Jewish tomb inscriptions in Asia Minor. Both the above-mentioned texts as well as Paul made changes to Deut. 30:11-14. In the Baruch text, it is divine wisdom that is being searched for. This one may have been particularly important to Paul who understood Christ to be the wisdom of God. Jews had connected Torah to wisdom and believed the indwelling of God's wisdom (Torah) would produce a pious life. Paul changed "cross to the other side of the sea" in Deut. 30:13 to "descended into the abyss" here in verse 7. Paul also added the additional comment that Christ is the one who ascends and descends. *Targum Neofiti* (a 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. AD interpretive commentary on the Pentateuch that certainly contains much older material) inserted that Moses did not have to go to heaven to get the commandments and Jonah did not have to bring it up out of the sea. As this shows, Paul's fluid use of this text was consistent with other Jewish writer's adaptations of the text.

"Ascend" in verse 6 is a reference to the incarnation and "descend" refers to Christ's death. By replacing the commands of God in Deuteronomy with Christ, Paul was taking emphasis off Torah and identifying Jesus as the wisdom of God. Paul was also proclaiming the faithfulness of God. No one has to ascend into the heavens or descend into the abyss to experience the benefits of the Christ event. In fact, God has brought His faithful word (Jesus: "word of faith"), to you and He (Jesus) is as near as your mouth and your heart.

The transformed heart that confesses Jesus as resurrected Lord makes covenant relationship with God an experienced reality ("and so is justified") and leads to

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Dr. Brandon Fredenburg, professor, Lubbock Christian University, Lubbock, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 38b, pg. 604.

the anticipation of the future salvation when God's intentions for all creation come to its completion ("and so is justified"). The confession of verse 9 was probably similar to the kind of proclamation of faith early Christians made at baptisms and in corporate worship.

This discussion of confession may have something to say to modern day Christians. Is it possible that we have made confession (as some have at least stated) one of many steps that have to be accomplished by us in order to receive salvation? Can it become a command to be obeyed that earns us some favor with God? Can it become an identity marker in a way that distorts what Paul is saying here? Confession is not a magical formula ("I believe Jesus is the Son of God") that manipulates God to save me but a natural and uncontainable response that comes from the heart of one who has come to see Jesus for who He is and who sees God as one who relentlessly pursues his creation out of His own faithfulness and love.

Verse 11 comes from Isa. 28:16 ("One who trusts will not panic") and was quoted earlier by Paul in 9:33. Many of the themes found in Romans are in Isa. 28 (i.e. rebellion, remnant, stumbling stone laid in Zion, righteousness). Paul made two important interpretive changes to the Isa. 28 text. He began with "all" or "everyone." Neither the NRSV's "No one" nor the NIV's "anyone" show Paul's intent clearly enough. "All" is found four times in verses 11-13 and is found seven other times in Romans to speak of the universal nature of the gospel. So a better translation might be, "All who trust in Him will not be put to shame." This is not just for Jews, it is for "all," including Gentiles.

Paul also inserted "in him," thus interpreting this text to be referring to Jesus. This understanding of Torah was what the NJT and many Jews had missed. All persons, Jew or Gentile, who trust in Jesus Messiah will not be "put to shame" or disgraced.

Verses 12 and 13 expound on verse 11. Verse 13 is a quote from Joel 2:32. There, Israel was told (2:26-27) that God would remove her shame. The NJT would have seen both the Isa. 28 and Joel 2 texts as applying only to Jews. Paul interpreted the "all" to both Jew and Gentile. Now, "all" people experience the riches of God through Jesus Messiah. The NJT would have seen the idea of calling on God as an activity that was peculiar to a devout Jew. Now it is described as a response of Gentiles to God as well. In calling on God, Gentiles aligned themselves within the salvation-history of the Jew as God had always intended it to be.

## **Conclusion**

It still gnawed at the NJT that Gentiles, who didn't even desire covenant relationship with God attained it and most Jews, who had vigorously pursued righteousness, did not obtain their goal. The problem was how the race was run or how Israel understood Torah. Israel pursued righteousness through doing the deeds of Torah and practicing distinctive Jewish rituals. Israel could not obtain their goal through the pursuit of Torah because of the weakness of their flesh and the ability of Sin to use Torah to bring sin and death. On top of that reality, God put a stumbling stone in their path making it impossible for some to see God's righteousness (see God's saving act in Jesus Messiah). As will be seen later, this stumbling has a purpose and is not a

permanent situation. This conversation is not over and this is not the final word on Israel.

If Israel had read Torah rightly, they would have understood that they could not gain life through the deeds of Torah and they would also have understood that they did not have to ascend into heaven or descend into the abyss to bring God's righteousness to them. God, out of His faithfulness, dropped His righteousness into Israel's lap in Jesus Messiah. All Israel had to do was recognize the Christ event as the righteous act of God. In doing so, trust in Jesus Messiah as the resurrected Lord would have flowed from their hearts and mouths unashamedly bringing Israel the experience of covenant relationship. They would also have understood that God's righteousness through Jesus rather than through Torah is for "all" (Jew and Gentile) who call upon Jesus.

