



## The Epistle to the Romans

Lesson Number 32



# ISRAEL'S PRESENT CONDITION AND ITS CAUSE

9:30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; <sup>31</sup> but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. <sup>32</sup> Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. <sup>33</sup> As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

– Romans 9:30-33 <sup>NKJV</sup> –

## INTRODUCTION

The appointed means of becoming righteous is announced in the Gospel of Christ. *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith"* (1:16-17). Having introduced the subject of righteousness, the Spirit has firmly established our need for it. Righteousness is not a spiritual luxury, nor is it a mere

option. God cannot and will not accept an unrighteous person in His presence.

### THE GENTILES

In order to firmly plant this in our thinking, the Spirit showed how the Gentiles plummeted far from God, even though they were in the very midst of a creation that testified to His *"eternal power and Godhead."* They did not grasp enough of the truth to become thankful (1:21). They also stopped short of their appointed vocation, which was to seek the

Lord and find Him (Acts 17:26-27). They actually became idolaters, ascribing the glory of God to all manner of creatures (1:23). To confirm the corruption of their hearts, God gave some of them over to their own desires. Immediately they descended into the depths of immorality, thereby confirming they were NOT righteous (1:24-27). As a whole, God gave them over to their reprobate and depraved minds. Rather than this producing a wave of righteousness, it broke out in all manner of moral and spiritual depravity

## LESSON OUTLINE

- I. WHAT SHALL WE SAY? (9:30a)
- II. THE GENTILES DID NOT PURSUE IT, BUT ATTAINED IT (9:30b)
- III. ISRAEL PURSUED IT, BUT DID NOT ATTAIN IT (9:31)
- IV. WHY DID NOT ISRAEL ATTAIN RIGHTEOUSNESS? (9:32a)
- V. THEY STUMBLED AT THE STUMBLING STONE (9:32b)
- VI. A STUMBLING STONE AND ROCK OF OFFENSE (9:33a)
- VII. THE ONE WHO BELIEVES (9:33b)

(1:28-32). The Gentiles were not righteous. After 2,500 years, not a single righteous person surfaced among their number. The ONLY people who obtained favor with God were those to whom He revealed Himself.

### THE JEWS

The Jews fared no better, even though they were given remarkable advantages. Their knowledge was increased, as both right and wrong were revealed to them. This was given to them in the form of commandments and ordinances. They also received strong incentives to obey these commandments. Remarkable blessings were promised if they would obey, and staggering curses were pronounced upon them if they disobeyed. If there was any latent goodness in them, these would surely awaken them to righteousness. However, they became guilty of the same sins as the Gentiles, even though they had been tutored by God himself (2:1-27). They also needed righteousness.

### "GUILTY!"

The Divine verdict of "GUILTY" is pronounced upon the entirety of the human race, both Jew and Gentile. No one is righteous, not one is good, and none can be found that seeks after God (3:9-19). It makes no difference what time period you examine, all need a righteousness from God. Regardless of the people group you peruse, all need the righteousness of God. Whether the people are informed or uninformed, they stand before God totally bereft of

righteousness. What is even more, they are incapable of changing their condition.

### THE ROLE OF FAITH

Having confirmed the absolute weakness of human nature, the Spirit revealed the essentiality and effectiveness of faith. That is the appointed means through which the righteousness of God will be received (3:21-22). This is demonstrated in the person of Abraham, who believed God and was counted righteous because of it (4:1-25).

The effectiveness of faith is expounded in the chapters five and six. Through it we obtain peace with God, who then begins to work within us. Through baptism into Christ, we are brought into the Lord Himself, becoming dead indeed unto sin and alive to God. In our new state, we are charged with the responsibility of yielding to God and subduing our members that are upon the earth. Every resource needed for this noble work is supplied in Christ Jesus.

### REMNANTS OF THE OLD NATURE

To confirm that righteousness has been imputed to us, and not achieved by us, the Spirit points out that the remnants of the condemned nature remain in us. This is "*the flesh*," and is consistently aligned against God, in disagreement with Him, and fighting against Him. The seventh chapter details the fierce conflict that exists between the flesh and the Spirit – a battle that produces great discontent within the believer.

### NO CONDEMNATION

Substantiating the effectiveness of the righteousness of God, which is received by faith, it is affirmed that we are not condemned in Christ Jesus. This is true even though the law of sin remains in

our members, fighting against the desires of our renewed hearts and minds. Chapter eight proclaims this with great power.

The Holy Spirit Himself assists us in the battle, leading us to subjugate the flesh (8:13-14). He even makes effective intercession for us because we do not know what to pray for (8:26-27).

Now that we have the righteousness of God, He is working everything together for our good (8:28). No adversarial power is capable of separating us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:35-39).

### THE ISRAELITES

Because there is a remarkable tendency in men—even redeemed men—to place confidence in the flesh, the Spirit causes us to consider Israel according to the flesh. Although they had every advantage given to men prior to Christ, it did not produce righteousness in them. What is even more, all of those advantages were given at the discretion of God. They did not ask for any of them (9:1-5).

The successfulness of the Word of God did not depend upon the Israelites themselves. Although it appeared as though His determination had fallen to the ground, a remnant remained among the people. This is traced to Divine choice—a choice that was not motivated by fleshly lineage or the works of men (9:6-13).

In all of this, God remained righteous in all that He did, preserving a remnant among the people, even under the most trying of circumstances. He even raised up Pharaoh to show His great power, and to make His name great (9:17). His choices were motivated by His will, not the people who were favored (9:18-21).

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God's intention is to reveal "the riches of His glory" on vessels of mercy, prepared beforehand for this purpose. These include both Jews and Gentiles, with the Jews being prominent, and the Gentiles being additions: "not of the Jews only, but **also** of the Gentiles" (9:23-29). The great work God has purposed, and is carrying out with precision, is nothing less than the conferment of His righteousness upon the sons of men. That is the marvelous work being accomplished in Christ Jesus.

**CONCLUSION**

Having laid the foundation for our thought, the Spirit now assesses both the Jews and Gentiles. He does it with God's purpose in mind—the conferment of His righteousness upon the sons of men. This righteousness is absolutely essential, yet cannot be conjured up or produced by men. He will show who obtained it and who did not. He will also tell us Why some succeeded and some did not.

He will now explain why the unbelieving Jews have NOT obtained this

righteousness, and why the believing Gentiles have. He will show this has not happened because of man's will or effort, "it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (9:16).

Knowing that "flesh" will erupt in murmuring against God, the Spirit will show us in a very practical way why Israel has been rejected and the Gentiles accepted. It is NOT because God's word has failed. It is not because God has cancelled His promises, for He cannot lie. What, then, can be said on this subject?

**WHAT SHALL WE SAY?**

**“ 9:30a What shall we say then?”**

When the truth is affirmed, it is imperative that men respond to it. In fact, they WILL respond to it, it only remains to identity HOW they do. In order to assist us in our response, the Spirit asks this question. "What shall **WE** say then?"

This is now the sixth time this very question has been asked.

abound?" (6:1)

❑ **CONCERNING GOD'S HOLY LAW.** "WHAT SHALL WE SAY then? is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." (7:7)

❑ **CONCERNING GOD'S ACTIONS.** "WHAT SHALL WE SAY then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid." (9:14)

**what the Lord has said and done, we cannot profit from His words or His deeds.**

In the teaching of little children, truth is put into their minds in anticipation of the day when they will ponder and think upon it. While young, their thoughts are few and immature. Thus we structure their minds by teaching them what the Lord has said and done. However, there must come a time when we "put away childish things" (1 Cor 13:11). When that time comes, our minds must wrap themselves around the Word of the Lord. Our rationality must embrace truth, ponder it, and meditate upon it. Then, and only then, is conversion and growth in grace possible.

Much of the religion of our day fails to promote thought. It deals with things too close to the surface of the mind, and too far from the depths of the heart. This is the bane of religious entertainment, much of the popular "Christian music" of our time, and the penchant for brevity in the churches. What is heard is too easily forgotten, for it offers no challenge for the remarkable capabilities of the heart and mind.

However, if we will "hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches," He will engage our minds. We will be challenged to reason upon the truth. God will call upon us to "reason together" with Him (Isa 1:18). In that process, and as our hearts are tender and submissive, He will

**By asking these questions, the Spirit is directing our thoughts – leading us, as it were, to consider the things of God. Until our minds are provoked to consider what the Lord has said and done, we cannot profit from His words or His deeds.**

❑ **CONCERNING GOD TAKING VENGEANCE.** "But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, **WHAT SHALL WE SAY?** Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man)." (3:5)

❑ **CONCERNING OUR FATHER ABRAHAM.** "WHAT SHALL WE SAY then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?" (4:1)

❑ **CONCERNING OUR RELATIONSHIP TO SIN.** "WHAT SHALL WE SAY then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may

❑ **CONCERNING THE REJECTION OF THE JEWS AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE GENTILES.** "WHAT SHALL WE SAY then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith." (9:30)

**THE ROLE OF THOUGHT**

By asking these questions, the Spirit is directing our thoughts – leading us, as it were, to consider the things of God. **Until our minds are provoked to consider**

open the truth up to us, thereby producing growth and conformity to the image of His Son.

How often we are reminded of the role of thought. Our love for God is to be with the "heart" and "mind," as well as our "soul" and "strength" (Mk 12:30). We are exhorted, "think on these things" (Phil 4:8), "meditate upon these things" (1 Tim 4:15), and "consider what I say" (2 Tim 2:7). "Every thought" is to be "brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). There is no better way for this to be accomplished than in the extended consideration of what the Lord has declared – particularly of Himself and His wonderful works.

Thus our minds are called to enter the sacred vestibule of thought. What will we say? What will be our response to what the Lord has declared? What kind of conclusions will we reach?

**DIRECTED THOUGHT**

As will be confirmed by the answer, the Spirit is not asking for our opinion, but guiding us to a sanctified conclusion. The objective is to point our hearts and minds in the right direction – the area where thought will be profitable and Divine tutelage is experienced.

The conclusion that is delivered to us cannot be appropriated through the wisdom of this world. If the Lord did not

reveal it to us, it would never have been known. However, when the truth is loved and received, the answer will at once become apparent to us when it is revealed.

**THE REALITIES BEFORE US**

The Lord has set before us certain realities. These are the matters concerning which a revealed conclusion will be given.

- God shows mercy on those to whom He wills to show mercy (v 15a).
- He has compassion upon those to whom He wills to show compassion (v 15b).

- He calls those who were not His people, "My people," and those who were not beloved, "beloved" (v 25).
- The Lord will finish the work He has begun on earth, terminating it abruptly in righteousness (v 28).

It is as though the Spirit knows flesh will use such knowledge to excuse itself from all responsibility. It will reason that God acts without regard for human will or effort, and therefore they are both useless. However, this is erroneous reasoning. It brings no glory to God, and no salvation to men. Thus, the Spirit will throw it down,

**Thus our minds are called to enter the sacred vestibule of thought. What will we say? What will be our response to what the Lord has declared? What kind of conclusions will we reach?**

- It is not of him that wills, or of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy (v 16).
- He hardens whomever He wills to harden (v 18).
- God can make people vessels of honor or vessels of dishonor (v 21).
- He endured vessels prepared for destruction in the prospect of making known the riches of His glory upon the vessels prepared for mercy (v 22-23).

for such thinking is inhibitive, stunting the soul and blinding the eyes.

The conclusion that follows confirms that human responsibility is not excluded by Divine Sovereignty. While man will not be able to glory in the presence of the Lord, neither will he be permitted to be idle and unreceptive. A lack of response to God is never justified. It will further be shown that certain effort is futile.

**THE GENTILES DID NOT PURSUE IT, BUT ATTAINED IT**

<sup>9:30b</sup> ***That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith.*** This confirms that all along the subject has been obtaining the righteousness of God. There is no hope of being received by God if we do not receive His righteousness. Following this line of reasoning with consistency, the book of Romans mentions "righteousness" thirty-nine times.

- It is revealed in the Gospel of Christ, and is obtained by faith in order to faith (1:17).
- There is a righteousness that comes

- from the Law (2:26).
- Our unrighteousness demonstrates that God is righteous (3:5).
- The righteousness of God for men is now revealed without the Law, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets (3:21).
- The righteousness of God is obtained by faith in Jesus Christ (3:22).
- God's righteousness is declared for the remission of sins (3:25).
- Because of Christ's vicarious death, God righteousness is declared, that He might be just and justifier of the one who believes on Jesus (3:26).
- Abraham believed God, and it was

- imputed to him for righteousness (4:1).
- The one who works not, but believes on Jesus, his faith is counted to him for righteousness (4:5).
- David described the blessedness of the man to whom God imputed righteousness without works (4:6).
- Faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness (4:9).
- Abraham's circumcision was a sign of the righteousness he had while yet uncircumcised (4:11).
- Abraham became an heir of the world through the righteousness of faith (4:13).

- Because Abraham did not stagger at the promises of God, but was fully persuaded that what God had promised He was able also to perform, his faith was imputed to him for righteousness (4:22).
- Righteousness is a gift, given to us because of Christ (5:17).
- Because of Christ's one act of righteousness, His death, men received justification (5:18).
- Grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life (5:21).
- Those who are dead with Christ are to yield their members unto God as instruments of righteousness (6:13).
- The obedience of faith leads to righteousness (6:16).
- Being made free from sin, we have become the servants of righteousness (6:18).
- Being servants of righteousness leads to holiness (6:19).
- When we were the servants of sin, we were free from righteousness (6:20).
- The righteousness of the Law is fulfilled in those who walk after the Spirit (8:4).
- If Christ is in us, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (8:10).
- What God performs is cut short in righteousness (9:28).
- The Gentiles, though they did not pursue righteousness have attained to it by faith (9:30).
- Israel who followed after the law of righteousness has not attained to it (9:31).
- Because Israel was ignorant of God's righteousness, they did not attain to it (10:1).
- Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes (10:3).
- Moses described the righteousness of the law by saying if you kept it you would live (10:5).
- The righteousness of faith does not speak of man doing, but of man believing (10:6).
- With the heart man believes unto righteousness (10:10).
- Righteousness is an essential element of the Kingdom of God (14:17).

I have taken the time to list these references to show the centrality of

righteousness in the Spirit's reasoning. The seeming diversion to the subject of Israel was to show us that righteousness was the issue with them. God did not choose them because of their goodness. Not only were they the appointed means through whom the Savior entered the world, they were also provided confirmation that righteousness cannot come through human effort.

The Spirit will now contrast the acceptance of the Gentiles with the rejection of all but the remnant of the Israelites. Again, it is important to see that the attainment of righteousness is the critical matter.

Rather than pursuing righteousness, their rapid degradation is outlined.

- When they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God (1:21a).
- They were not thankful (1:21b).
- They became vain in their imaginations (1:21c).
- Their foolish heart was darkened (1:21d).
- Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools (1:22).
- They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the image of man, birds, four-footed beasts, and creeping things (1:23).
- When delivered over to the lusts of

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**THEY DID NOT PURSUE IT**

*"That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith."* This is the first response to the question, *"What shall we say then?"* The first chapter of Romans dealt with the Gentiles before Christ. This text speaks of them from the viewpoint of after Christ. Here we will find they never did pursue righteousness. It was never an issue with them, which confirmed their deplorable ignorance of the Living God.

**THEY FOLLOWED NOT AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS**

The Gentiles provide us with an example of people without Divine direction. The Spirit has already revealed the focus of the Gentile's life. Although they occupied the Lord's own creation, and although that creation clearly testified of His *"eternal power and Godhead,"* or Divinity, the Gentiles did not respond to its testimony appropriately. In fact, they sinned grievously. In the words of our text, *"they followed not after righteousness,"* or *"did not pursue righteousness."*<sup>NIV</sup>

their heart they dishonored their bodies among themselves (1:24).

- They changed the truth of God into a lie, worshiping and serving the created more than the Creator (1:25).
- When given over to their vile affections, they descended into the morass of sodomy (1:26-27).
- They did not like to retain God in their knowledge (1:28a).
- Being given over to a reprobate mind, they were filled with all manner of reprehensible sin (1:29-31).
- Although they knew the judgment of God and that death was the suitable penalty for their conduct, they not only continued in their sin, but approved others who did so (1:32).

**They Did Not Know**

That remarkable descent of the Gentile world is summarized in our text: *"they followed not after righteousness."* Although they were given the advantage of living in the creation of a righteous God, they did not pursue righteousness. They made no real effort to please the Lord or be found in His favor. Rather, they sought the gratification of their own

sinful desires. Nature could not teach them of the reality or need of righteousness. Neither, indeed, did they have the capacity to discover these things through their own ingenuity.

They did not pursue righteousness because they knew neither the righteousness of God nor their own despicable unrighteousness. As marvelous as the testimony of nature is, it says absolutely nothing about God being righteous or man needing righteousness. Still, the fact that they did not seek the righteousness that comes from God only accentuated their sinful condition. It was no sign of innocence, nor could it be overlooked by the Almighty God.

The Gentiles are certainly a people requiring mercy. God has declared *"I will show mercy to whom I will, I will take pity on whom I will"*<sup>NAB</sup> (9:15). Will He choose to have mercy on such unworthy wretches? Will they be able to take hold of the righteousness He announces in the Gospel of His Son? Will they be required to go through some sort of orientation class before they can receive mercy and compassion? Will they be required to measure up to some code of morals before they can receive mercy?

### THEY HAVE ATTAINED UNTO RIGHTEOUSNESS

*"Gentiles . . . have attained to righteousness."* Here is the wonderful announcement! *"They have attained unto righteousness,"* even though they did not seek it! To *"attain"* righteousness is to obtain or gain it. To *"attain"* righteousness is to actually become righteous. It is to be received by God, made acceptable to Him. It is to be right in His eyes, with no charge of guilt against them.

The Gentiles did not obtain it by their will, nor by their effort, for *"it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy"* (v 16). Further, God was righteous and good in showing mercy unto them. It was His will to do so, and that made it right.

This text does not speak of the whole of the Gentiles, but of a remnant of them. Paul, the writer of this Epistle, was raised up by God to *"bear His name before the Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel"* (Acts 9:15). He was chosen to be a *"light unto the Gentiles"* (Acts 13:47). This gracious provision was not granted in response to a plea from the Gentiles. They were not driven by a deep sense of their need for righteousness to seek the Lord or His righteousness. The words of Jesus were certainly not being fulfilled in them: *"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you"* (Matt 6:33). Yet,

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even though they were not seeking righteousness from God, they obtained it. What a marvelous display of Divine mercy!

### Some of the First Gentiles

The Gentiles were not the first to obtain righteousness. Although Peter announced on the day of Pentecost that the promise was to those who were *"afar off,"* some years past before any of their number was actually made righteous. Among the Gentiles who attained this righteousness were the city of Samaria (Acts 8:5-8), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-39), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48), and Lydia (Acts 16:13-14).

### An Objection

It might be countered that each of the above had been exposed to the truth, and

thus were, in some sense, seeking. The Samaritans were a sort of half-breed. They were the result of the Israelites intermarrying with the Babylonians following the Babylonian captivity. Thus, they might be considered Jewish to some extent. The Ethiopian eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship, and thus might be considered to be seeking favor with God. Cornelius was a devout man who prayed to God always, and gave alms of all he had, and thus might be said to be seeking the Lord. Lydia was praying at a riverside when she first heard the Gospel, obviously engaged in some form of quest for Divine favor.

There is no indication that any of these people were aware of an available righteousness from God until they heard the Gospel. Further, nothing in Scripture indicates they were seeking to be made righteous. That very concept was little known prior to Christ Jesus.

Even if a person chooses to discount the Gentiles just mentioned, there are others who attained unto righteousness who were in no way seeking it. The Philippian jailor is a case in point (Acts 16:27-31). The barbarous people on the island of Melita are another example (Acts 28:1-9). It is possible to name others like some devout Greeks and chief women from Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4), and certain men, Dionysius, and Damaris, from Athens (Acts 17:34). So far as we know, none of these were engaged in any quest for the righteousness of God, yet they attained unto it.

In their cases, the Lord sought them out, and not vice versa. Jesus did say, *"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10). Again He said, *"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd"* (John 10:16). Later, in the tenth chapter of Romans, the Lord will affirm, *"I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me"* (Rom 10:20).

This is a most blessed circumstance which accounts for the salvation of multitudes.

**RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH**

“... even the righteousness which is by faith.”<sup>NASB</sup> The Spirit will now be more specific about His meaning. Righteousness was not simply thrown upon the Gentiles, covering their wretchedness like a blanket. While some may be disposed to imagine this would bring glory to God, it would not.

There is a Divinely appointed means by which righteousness is “attained.” That means cannot be ignored. God will always honor it. As we will see, that means involves both God and the recipient of righteousness. God gives righteousness, but faith appropriates it.

The Gentiles did not climb into

righteousness, they **obtained it**. They did not obtain it because they measured up, but because they had faith. They did not become righteous through their own efforts, but were “**made righteous**” by the “**obedience**” of Christ (5:19). This is the very righteousness announced in the Gospel, in which “**a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last**”<sup>NIV</sup> (1:17).

Salvation, in all of its aspects, whether of the Jews or the Gentiles, is “**of the Lord**” (Jonah 2:9). It is ever true, “**Salvation belongs to the LORD**” (Psa 3:8). And again it is written, “**But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD**” (Psa 37:39). Particularly regarding becoming righteous, the Lord declares, “**And their righteousness is from Me, says the LORD**”<sup>NKJV</sup> (Isa 54:17). This righteousness was attained by the Gentiles, who were not seeking after it,

and it was attained through their faith.

In the case of the Gentiles, the working of God was as effective as His choice of Isaac (9:7), and His love of Jacob (9:13). The Lord had mercy upon them because He wanted to, even though they fell short of His glory. He had compassion upon them because He wanted to, even though they were “**not a people.**”

**Further Declaration of the Circumstance**

- God would justify the heathen **through faith** (Gal 3:8).
- God justified the uncircumcision **through faith** (Rom 3:30).
- The **door of faith** was opened to the Gentiles, even though they were not seeking it (Acts 14:27).
- God **granted** the Gentiles “**repentance to life**” (Acts 11:18).

**ISRAEL PURSUED IT, BUT DID NOT ATTAIN IT**

“<sup>31</sup> **But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness.**”

Although they were the only elected nation in the world, and although they were given every possible advantage, yet they did not attain to the one thing they needed – **righteousness**. If all the flesh requires is tutelage and direction to attain unto righteousness, the Jews should be able to do it. They were chosen by God, becoming favored of Him “**above all people that are upon the face of the earth**” (Deut 7:6; Ex 19:5). He “**loved**” them, showing them favor, delivering them from bondage, and giving them power over their enemies. He gave them a good and righteousness Law, such as was given to no other nation. Moses told Israel, “**What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?**”<sup>NIV</sup> (Deut 4:7-8).

Let it be clear, it simply is not possible for flesh to have more of an advantage than was given to Israel. If it is possible

*done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes?*”<sup>NKJV</sup> (Isa 5:4).

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for flesh to be trained, or schooled into righteousness, Israel will become righteous by this means.

How could God have possibly been more gracious to them? What more could He have done for them? Hear His lament over them. “**What more could have been**

Could He have chastened them more, making them righteous by the administration of His rod? Hear Him reply. “**Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it, But wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; They have not been closed or bound up, Or soothed with ointment**”<sup>NKJV</sup> (Isa 1:5-6). Again the Lord says to them, “**In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction: your own sword hath devoured your prophets, like a destroying lion**” (Jer 2:30). Of them He said, “**Because I have cleansed you, and you were not cleansed**” (Ezek 24:13).

Do men dare to speak of advantages, as though they made men better? Is it possible for the Lord to put flesh in a situation

where it will reform itself and suddenly become good? Hear the word of the Lord to Israel. *“Now will I sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes”* (Isa 5:1-2).

Those with a penchant for procedures and disciplines must consider their ways. There are countless *Christian* men who are teaching people to pursue uprightness by law. They suppose if people are given enough rules, and if they follow them faithfully, they will be transformed into righteous people. All of this is particularly reprehensible since God has set the nation of Israel before us as an example of the total vanity of this approach. He gave them **righteous** laws. He provided wonderful promises as an incentive to keep those laws. He issues fearful threats and curses to provoke them to faithfulness. He took up their cause, fighting their battles, delivering them from their enemies. He gave them godly judges and kings, and raised up holy prophets to apprise them of His will, and discover their condition to them. He provided them a land in which they could devote themselves to Him, and caused peace for them by changing the heart of their enemies. How is it possible for any more advantage to be given to the flesh?

The Spirit will now reveal why the Israelites did not attain to righteousness. It will not be because they did not try, for they *“pursued”* the law of righteousness.

**PURSUING**

*“... but Israel, pursuing . . .”* Other versions read, *“But Israel, which followed after,”*<sup>KJV</sup> *“but Israel, who did strive for,”*<sup>RSV</sup> and *“But the Jews, who tried so hard.”*<sup>NLT</sup> The word *“pursued,”* or *“followed after,”* is a very strong one. It indicates aggressiveness, and is by no means casual. From the standpoint of language, it

means to “pursue, follow after, and seek after.” It is the same word used to describe aggressive persecution (Gal 1:23; Phil 3:6).

These are the words of the Spirit, and they are precise. Men may conclude from the history of Israel that they did NOT pursue after righteousness, but rather neglected the whole matter. The Holy Spirit concludes that they DID pursue it, but did not obtain it. We do well to give heed to these words, for a significant point is about to be made.

**There are countless *Christian* men who are teaching people to pursue uprightness by law. They suppose if people are given enough rules, and if they follow them faithfully, they will be transformed into righteous people.**

**THE LAW OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**

The righteousness Israel zealously followed after is called *“the law of righteousness.”* The RSV reads, *“the righteousness which is based on law.”* The point is that they tried to measure up to the requirements of the Law. They attempted to do what the Lord told them to do, endeavoring to become righteous by fulfilling the *“law of commandments contained in ordinances”* (Eph 2:15).

**Not the Same as the Righteousness of God**

*“The law of righteousness,”* or *“the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law,”*<sup>NRSV</sup> is not to be equated with *“the righteousness of God.”* This is a righteousness described in the Law, and that was wed to the Law. This righteousness did not depend upon God, but upon men. The Law was precise in its requirements, but its statutes and ordinances were not designed to lead men into a righteous state.

The *“righteousness of God”* is pointedly declared to have been revealed *“without,”* or *“apart from the Law”* (3:21). The Law did testify of the righteousness, but had no ability to produce it. It could not make an unrighteous person righteous, or a sinner a saint. It could not change a person’s character or status, but only define it.

**An Objection**

The sophist will remonstrate, declaring that Israel did not pursue righteousness. Their hearts were far from God, as both the prophets and Jesus affirmed (Isa 29:13; Matt 15:8). How can such a people be said to have followed after the law of righteousness? Did not the prophets affirm Israel did NOT hearken to His words and had rejected His Law (Jer 6:19)? Did not God set His law before them, and did they not forsake it, refuse to obey His voice, and walk not in it (Jer 9:13). How can such a people be said to have pursued after the law of righteousness?

**The point being made is that flesh is incapable of a consistent and effective effort to obtain righteousness.**

The Israelites did the best anyone can do in the flesh, our blessed Lord Himself being the single exception. The flesh cannot be cultured spiritually – even by a good, holy, and spiritual law. Men needed to be taught this, and God used Israel to bring this truth home to our hearts. **The nature of the flesh cannot be changed, and hence it cannot be made righteous.** Whatever is born of the flesh *“is flesh,”* and can be nothing more. That is precisely why Jesus said, *“You must be born again”* (John 3:6-7)

**What About David?**

Someone might cite David, declaring that he was under the Law, yet seemed more successful in his efforts to be right with God. Was he not a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22)? This was, indeed, the case. Yet, David was motivated by faith, not by a mere quest for the law of righteousness. His petitions for grace confirmed he had seen more than the rest of the Israelites. *“Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.*



*Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with Thy free Spirit” (Psa 51:10-12).*

Those are the words of faith, showing David to be different from those who pursued righteousness through the Law. He sought for a new heart – one created by God Almighty (Psa 51:10). The Law chided Israel saying, *“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (Deut 10:16).*

The Prophets challenged the people, *“make you a new heart and a new spirit,”* but the law provided neither the direction nor the power to do so.

### THEY DID NOT ATTAIN

Having established the essentiality of righteousness, the Spirit is careful to tell us Israel did not attain the righteousness they sought. Israel *“has not attained to the law of righteousness.”* Clarifying that this refers to the righteousness outlined in the Law, other versions read, they *“did not arrive at that law,”*<sup>NASB</sup> they *“did not succeed in fulfilling that law,”*<sup>NASB</sup>

and *“who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded.”*<sup>NLT</sup> All of their efforts were futile – utterly useless.

This circumstance is precisely why it is written, *“For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second” (Heb 8:7).* The Law was not flawed in character. Nor, indeed, did it come short in its requirements. It was a holy, just, and good Law (Rom 7:12). **However, it had no power to change men, and men needed to be changed!**

## WHY DID NOT ISRAEL ATTAIN RIGHTEOUSNESS?

*“<sup>32a</sup> Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law.”* The Spirit will not leave us to conjecture about why Israel did not attain to the law of righteousness– why it did not become righteous before God by keeping the Law. He will confirm to us that men cannot be made righteous by procedure.

### REFRESHING OUR MIND

Remember, the Spirit is confirming to our hearts that man has fallen too far to recover himself. To confirm this, he will direct our attention to Israel. With the single exception of the Lord Jesus, they were the best of all flesh.

### Miraculously Birthed

They were a Divinely created nation, springing forth from a man, whose body was as good as dead, and a woman who had no capacity for giving birth. As it is written, *“Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised” (Heb 11:11).* And again, *“Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable” (Heb 11:12).*

### Divinely Cultured

Israel was a Divinely cultured nation. There were benefits applying exclusively to them that would enable them to lift themselves out of the quagmire of sin – if such a thing was possible. The extent of these advantages is staggering to consider. They included *“the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever” (9:4-5).* It simply is not possible to

water from the flinty rock (Neh 9:15). He subdued their enemies, granting them victories that could never have been achieved naturally (Psa 78:53). He gave them judges and kings, and holy prophets as well (Judges 2:16; Acts 13:22). He gave them a land, then blessed the land (Num 20:12; Jer 2:7).

How will a people with such marvelous advantages fair in seeking to attain the law of righteousness? Our text affirms they *“followed after the law of righteousness,”* yet *“hath not attained to the law of righteousness.”* Carefully note, the Spirit does not say they did not seek this righteousness! Rather, they DID pursue the righteousness that comes from keeping the Law.

Now the Spirit will tell us why they did not attain what they pursued.

### SEEKING BY FAITH

*“Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith . . .”*<sup>NASB</sup> Israel’s quest for righteousness was not driven by faith! They did not seek after righteousness because they believed God, nor did they trust in Him in order that they might become righteous.

### The Lesson to be Learned

Here we come to grips with the

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give the flesh any greater advantage.

### Protection and Provision

If the flesh can be trained to be righteous, it will occur in Israel. The Lord fed them miraculously with bread from heaven, and satisfied their thirst with

manner in which God instructed the world of their spiritual impotence. He gave Israel 1,500 years to keep the demands of the Law in their own strength. He gave them all of the information they needed. He fortified those demands with promises to lead them, and curses to push them. He devoted Himself exclusively to them, sending them His *“servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them”* (Jer 7:25). Israel did not want for information. They had all of the incentives possible. They were protected and nurtured to the fullest extent possible. Yet, they did not seek the righteousness of God by faith, and

translations. *“However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.”*<sup>NASB</sup> *“The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them.’”*<sup>NIV</sup> *“But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.’”*<sup>NRSV</sup> *“But the law does not depend on faith; rather, ‘the one who does these things will live by them.’”*<sup>NAB</sup> *“And the Law is based not on faith but on the principle, whoever complies with it will find life in it.”*<sup>NJB</sup>

The Law was a system of doing, and depended solely upon the doer. This was clearly stated in the Law. *“Ye shall therefore keep My statutes, and My judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD”* (Lev 18:5). This same affirmation is found in Nehemiah 9:29 and Ezekiel 20:11,13. Jesus alluded to this when He told the rich young ruler, *“but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments”* (Matt 19:17). Our Lord also affirmed this to a young lawyer whom He questioned concerning

the principle commandments: *“Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live”* (Lk 10:25-28). Earlier in Romans Paul wrote, *“For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them”* (Rom 10:5).

In these texts life (*“shall live by them,”* or *“in them”*) is equated with becoming righteous. To be alive unto God is to be righteous before Him. Thus our text refers to *“the law of righteousness,”* or the Law by which righteousness could be realized.

**The Law Spoke as Though It Could be Done**

Flesh is confused by the promises of the Law. It imagines it can keep the Law, and thus engages in efforts to do so. To the novice, it may appear as though the

Law encouraged the thought that men could be righteous through their obedience to the Law. A sampling of its promises will serve to confirm this.

- ❑ *“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully ALL His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God: Blessed shall you be . . .”* (Deut 28:1-3a).
- ❑ *“And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve Him with ALL your heart and with ALL your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full”* (Deut 11:13-14).
- ❑ *“Only if thou CAREFULLY HEARKEN unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day. For the LORD thy God blesseth thee, as He promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee”* (Deut 15:5-6).
- ❑ *“And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep ALL His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee”* (Ex 15:26).

Not one word is said about believing, only doing! The reward for this doing was sufficient incentive to compel the Israelites to engage in the effort. Their attempts would confirm that the kind of response demanded by the Law simply was not possible. Thus the Law was given

**The Law neither demanded or encouraged faith! It was a system of doing, not of believing! You will search in vain for any word under the Law that commanded people to believe God. The Law does not relate to faith nor require it.**

therefore did not become righteous.

**The Law Is Not of Faith**

Here is an arresting consideration that we do well to ponder. *“And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them”* (Gal 3:12). **The Law neither demanded or encouraged faith!** It was a system of doing, not of believing! **You will search in vain for any word under the Law that commanded people to believe God.** The Law does not relate to faith nor require it. The meaning of the Galatian verse is that righteousness cannot be attained by keeping the Law. It simply is not possible, and that is why Israel did not attain to righteousness. They sought it by an impossible means.

The remarkable strength of this consideration is reflected in the various

*“that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God”* (Rom 3:19).

### THE WORKS OF THE LAW

*“ . . . but as if it were based on works.”* <sup>NRSV</sup> These are not the *“wonderful works of God”* (Acts 2:11), but the achievements of men. These works must be perfect, flawless, and consistent. They cannot be seasonal, sporadic, or inconsistent. ALL of the commandments must be kept ALL OF THE TIME, or *“always.”* The Law did not demand that men TRY to keep it, but that they do so, and that without flaw.

The Lord knew Israel would utterly fail in their attempt to keep the Law, and thus an elaborate system was instituted to address their imperfections. The tabernacle service, the high priests, priests, and sacrifices were all instituted to address Israel’s imperfect obedience. That is why there was an altar, a laver, an altar of incense, and a mercy seat over the ark of the covenant. None of these would have been required if righteousness could be realized by keeping the Law.

When Israel declared *“we will hear it, and do it,”* they meant well, fully intending to do what they said (Deut 5:27). Tragically, they did not realize the weakness of the flesh. However, God did, and when He heard their words He said, *“O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and **keep all my commandments always,** that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!”* (Deut 5:29).

### The Curse of the Law

In His death, Jesus delivered us from *“the curse of the Law,”* liberating us from its condemnation. Thus it is written, *“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’”* (Gal 3:13). False prophets of our day have cited this passage, declaring that poverty and disease are the curse of the Law. In so doing, they have thrust their listeners

into a deep sleep, hiding the truth from them.

We do not need men to interpret the curse of the Law for us. The Lord has spoken quite clearly on this matter. An unequivocal curse is pronounced upon all who rely upon law-keeping. *“All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who **does not continue to do everything**”*

**The Lord knew Israel would utterly fail in their attempt to keep the Law, and thus an elaborate system was instituted to address their imperfections.**

*written in the Book of the Law”* <sup>NIV</sup> (Gal 3:10). Other versions read, *“CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.”* <sup>NASB</sup> *“Cursed is everyone who does not **observe and obey all the things** written in the book of the law.”* <sup>NRSV</sup> *“Cursed is everyone who does not **continue to do everything** written in the Book of the Law.”* <sup>NIB</sup> *“A curse is on everyone who does not **keep on doing all the things** which are ordered in the book of the law.”* <sup>BBE</sup>

The Law demanded that **ALL of the commandments be observed ALL of the time.** Confirming the seriousness of the demand, the curse of God is pronounced upon all who fail to do so. There are no exceptions to the rule. That is why no person, regardless of acumen or discipline, can be justified by the Law. Thus it is written, *“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be*

*justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for **by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified** [or made righteous]”* (Gal 2:16).

### THE RELEVANCE OF THIS

This message is certainly up-to-date. In our time, there is a renewal of law-preaching. We do well to beware of it, for it is bringing a snare upon the people.

### The Prosperity Movement

The prosperity promises given under the Law are being held out to people as a reality they can possess under Christ. These purveyors of delusion have no regard whatsoever to the curse pronounced against all who attempt to be right before God by *“the works of the Law.”* Fifteen hundred years of Israel’s history are swept under the theological rug as though they did not even exist.

Under the Law, not a single promise of prosperity was offered to those who believed. They were only offered to those who perfectly kept the law (Deut 28:1-13). If they turned aside from any of God’s words, they would be cursed (Deut 28:14-68). The curses were numerous and staggering in content. If Israel did not keep all of God’s laws all of the time, those curses are all they could expect to receive from God.

### Justification by Works

On the other hand, others are teaching the works of the Law as a means to becoming righteous before God. They go to the book of James, distorting its message, and preaching it as though it was the Gospel of Christ instead of a rebuke to spiritually indolent people. Taking the words *“justified by works”* (James 2:21,24,25), these teachers approach being righteous precisely as the Law, overlooking that James also added, *“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all”* (James 2:10).

James is speaking of the **evidence** of justification, not its cause. We know this because James adduces Abraham’s faith

as the cause of his righteousness and his works as the evidence of it. *“But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”* (James 2:20-24).

Between the time Abraham “believed God” (Gen 15:6), and the offering up of Isaac (Gen 22), forty-eight years passed. It is the height of absurdity to say Abraham’s justification did not occur until he took Isaac to the mount chosen by God in Moriah. We are categorically told that Abraham was justified BEFORE he was circumcised, which was a considerable time before God told him to sacrifice Isaac (Rom 4:10). James, therefore, refers to the confirmation of Abraham’s justification. That is, his obedience verified that he had been made righteous.

James reasons in this manner because the people to whom he was writing were not living by faith. They had become friends of the world (4:4), and were living in alienation from God. Thus he showed them that obedience and works DO flow from faith. The “works” of which he spoke were not the “works of the law,” but the works of faith. These are works that are not possible under the Law, for “the Law is not of faith” (Gal 3:12).

Our father Abraham did not depend upon the offering of Isaac to make him righteous. That deed was not the root of his righteousness, but its branch. Abraham responded obediently to God’s command because he was righteous. His obedience confirmed that was the case.

It is important that we learn from the Israelites. Righteousness does not come by the works of the Law, otherwise Israel, cultured by God, would have obtained it. This is the very point that is being made in our text. The Gentiles who did not seek righteousness found it, and the Jews who pursued the law of righteousness did not attain to it. The reason for their failure explains similar failures in our day. They did not seek righteousness by faith, and thus they did not attain to it. Those who do not believe on Christ, seeking righteousness by faith, still fail to attain to it.

might have obtained righteousness.

However, this is not the case at all. The point is that they were seeking for righteousness by an unlawful and ineffective means. The righteousness of God can only be appropriated by faith. Israel did not attain to that righteousness because they did not seek it by faith. They rather sought to fulfill a Law that demanded more than they had to give. Those demands were designed to stop their mouths and render them consciously guilty before the Almighty. In the wake of that persuasion they could have received

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#### **Making An End of the Means**

The Law was a Divinely appointed means to an end. The end, or objective, was to define sin and convince men of their guilt, thereby stopping their mouths. Israel made the Law an end of itself, seeking to it for righteousness. In such an arrangement, faith was excluded.

It is possible for men to do the same thing today – to make an end out of something intended to be a means. A classic example is our baptism into Christ. That is the appointed means of inducting us into Christ, securing the remission of sins, and becoming alive unto God. When, however, baptism is viewed as an end of itself, men trust in it rather than in God, thereby nullifying its purpose.

#### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Our text is NOT saying that Israel did not pursue the law of righteousness with enough vigor. It is NOT that they were inconsistent in their pursuit of that righteousness. If only, some might reason, they had been more aggressive, they

righteousness just as surely as Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailor.

I am chagrined by the popularity of this approach to righteousness in the nominal church. Moral disciplines and routines are being hawked by the false prophets that offer the guarantee of living acceptably before God. However, such a life is only possible by faith, without which it is impossible to please God. If “works” centering in the holy, spiritual, and good Law of God could not attain to righteousness, you may be sure adherence to the demands of lesser laws cannot do so. If men insist on pursuing righteousness through law, it will be said of them as it is said of Israel, they have “not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith.” Righteousness cannot be realized apart from faith. It is simply not possible. Faith takes hold of righteousness. The Spirit will now elaborate on the futile effort of the Israelites, detailing what frustrated their efforts. He is showing us the necessity of faith.

## **THEY STUMBLER AT THE STUMBLING STONE**

“<sup>32a</sup> For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.” This is the explanation for Israel’s pursuit of

*The Means by Which We Become Righteous Is Again Brought to Our Attention--by Given O. Blakely*

righteousness by means of the Law. As will be developed in the next verse, the “*stumbling stone*” was the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the appointed means of men becoming righteous before God.

Jesus is only relevant to men if there is no other way to become righteous. If He is viewed as just another teacher, or one who presents some other alternative, He at once becomes a source of offense. This is why Jesus is not preached more zealously. It is precisely why men can be diverted to matters of Law rather than the necessity of a righteousness that is without spot or wrinkle. This is why religious people are easily diverted to domestic, social, and political issues. It is why economic matters are fundamental to some, while organizational issues seem primary to others. Like Israel, such people are stumbling at the stumbling stone.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO STUMBLE**

Simply put, the Israelites stumbled over Jesus because He was not what they expected Him to be. Isaiah foretold Jesus would not be perceived as critical to men. *“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men”*<sup>NIV</sup> (Isa 53:2-3). He did not appear to be what men really needed.

When presented as their King, they

replied, *“We have no king but Caesar”* (John 19:15). Jesus depicted Israel’s response to Him in the parable of *“a certain nobleman”* who *“went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.”* When calling his ten servants to himself, he delivered to them his goods, saying, *“Occupy till I come.”*

are made blind, they have stumbled at the stumbling stone. Although such people appeared to be discerning, when they confronted Jesus, they were blinded by the Light of this world rather than illuminated by Him.

The ultimate stumbling occurred

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However, *“his citizens”* hated him, and sent a message after him saying, *“We will not have this man to reign over us”* (Lk 19:12-14). They were stumbling over the nobleman just like the Israelites stumbled over Christ.

In this case, *“stumbling”* is not simply tripping. Rather, it is being so intent upon self-will that Divine provision actually causes the person to fall. Jesus put it this way, *“For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind”* (John 9:39). When those who see

when the Israelites cried out to Pilate, *“Let Him be crucified!”* When Pilate asked what evil He had done, they only cried out the more, *“Let Him be crucified.”* When Pilate sought to wash his hands of all involvement in the matter, the Israelites cried out, *“His blood be on us, and on our children”* (Matt 27:22-25). How could they speak in such a manner? They had stumbled over the stumbling stone! Who Jesus was had brought out who they really were. The One who was intended to bring them advantage, caused them to be cursed. This was because *“they received Him not.”*

**A STUMBLING STONE AND ROCK OF OFFENSE**

<sup>33a</sup> **As it is written: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense . . .’** When men have wicked hearts, it is God’s manner to expose that wickedness by setting goodness before them. In this way, the wretchedness of self is more clearly seen, as well as the justice of God. The very thing that brings salvation to the believer brings condemnation to the unbeliever. There are several examples of this in Scripture.

□ **THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL.** *“And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is*

*baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned”* (Mk 16:15-26). The same Gospel that brings salvation to the one believing it, is the occasion of damnation to those who do not believe it. To the unbeliever, it is a stumbling stone.

□ **THE INFLUENCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS.** *“For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?”* (2 Cor 2:15-16). The same godly influence that promotes life among

the believers, promotes death among unbelievers. To them, it is a stumbling stone.

□ **THE RETURN OF JESUS.** *“And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe*

(because our testimony among you was believed) in that day” (2 Thess 1:7-10). The same coming that brings glory to the saints, and admiration from them, brings vengeance, punishment, and destruction to the wicked. To them, it will be a stumbling stone.

These texts confirm the effect of a stumbling stone. We will now see that the Almighty God places the stumbling stone so that it will accomplish His purpose and reveal the hearts of men.

#### PLACED BY GOD

“Behold, I lay in Zion . . . ”

The text is taken from Isaiah 28:16. “Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, **I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation.**” Peter also refers to this Divine work. “Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, **I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious**” (1 Pet 2:6). The Lord Jesus also referred to this event, citing it as an explanation for the chief priest’s and elder’s rejection of Himself. “Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: **this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?**” (Matt 21:42).

God placed Jesus, the foundation stone, where He was accessible to those who were seeking salvation. He also placed Him where He was observable to those who labored to establish their own righteousness.

The Lord Jesus was placed among men by God Himself. That Divine placement proved to be the undoing of all who pursued the law of righteousness – all who sought to become righteous through their own efforts. To aspire to such a thing is like a blind man trying to give himself sight, or a man with a withered hand attempting to make it whole. Lazarus might as well attempt to return from the dead under his own power as for a man to seek to be righteous by keeping the Law. Such efforts are totally futile,

and were revealed to be so when God placed the Foundation Stone among men.

The Stone was laid following His exaltation in heaven. While men were introduced to Him when He walked among them, His role as a Foundation

**This was the Stone upon which all valid efforts had to be founded. God will accept no building, or human effort, that is not upon the Foundation of His Son. Those who stumble over Him have refused to accept Him in that ordained capacity. They choose Law over Christ, and works over faith.**

became a reality only after He had been “tried” – proven to be adequate for the salvation of His people.

This was the Stone upon which all valid efforts had to be founded. God will accept no building, or human effort, that is not upon the Foundation of His Son. Those who stumble over Him have refused to accept Him in that ordained capacity. They choose Law over Christ, and works over faith.

#### THE STUMBLING STONE

Isaiah spoke powerfully of this Stone becoming the occasion of stumbling. “Sanctify the LORD of hosts Himself; and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. And He shall be for a sanctuary; but **for a stone of stumbling** and for a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken” (Isa 8:13-15).

Notice how the very One established as a sanctuary became the occasion for stumbling. This fulfilled the prophecy

given by Simeon when Jesus was only eight days old. “Behold, this child is set for the **fall and rising again** of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against” (Luke 2:34).

Those who stumble over Jesus do so because they have preferred darkness to light. As Jesus said, “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

#### THE ROCK OF OFFENSE

“ . . . and rock of offense.”

This expression is used three times in Scripture: Isaiah 8:14; Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8. Other versions bring out the strength of this statement. “a rock that **makes them fall**,”<sup>NIV</sup> “a rock that **will make them fall**,”<sup>NRSV</sup> “a rock **in the way**,”<sup>BBE</sup> and “a rock **to trip people up**.”<sup>NJB</sup>

The Lord will not allow flesh to glory in His presence. The affirmations of the Spirit are unusually strong in this matter. “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall **no flesh be justified in his sight**” (Rom 3:20). “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: **that no flesh should glory in his presence**” (1 Cor 1:27-29).

The preaching of Christ throws the Stone of offense in the path of all who are seeking to be righteous through the Law. They will not be able to get around the Stone, and it will bring out their enmity against God. Anyone who refuses to “fall on this Stone” (Matt 21:44) is, by that very circumstance, revealed to be wicked and alienated from God.

The enmity uncovered by the Lord Jesus is so strong it will move Scribes, Pharisees, Saducees, lawyers, and even the high priest, to seek the death of Jesus

(John 7:1; Matt 27:1; Mk 15:1). It will compel religious men to seek the death of Paul, even taking a vow not to eat until they have killed him (Acts 9:23-24; 23:12). It will move the Jewish council to stone Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (Acts 7:58-59).

Let it be clear that the declaration of Christ **causes** this enmity to rise, and designedly so. It is in this sense that Jesus is a “*rock of offense*.” He is offensive to all flesh, but never to such an extensive degree as in those who are seeking to be justified by the Law.

#### AN APPLICATION

Simeon once said of Jesus, “*Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed*” (Luke 2:34-35).

One of the invaluable ministries of preaching Jesus is the discovery of the hearts of men. The Word of God is said to be “*living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*” (Heb 4:12). That is never more true than when the Gospel of Christ is preached! An

excellent example of this is found in the preaching of Christ Jesus in a synagogue in Antioch of Pisida. At that time, the Jews were incensed because of the preaching. They were “*filled with envy,*

stumbling and a rock of offense. To the Gentiles, it was a Foundation Stone upon which their lives could be built.

Thus, the pursuit of righteousness

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and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming” (Acts 13:45). On the other hand, the Gentiles, upon hearing the same message, “*were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed*” (Acts 13:48).

The condition of the hearts of these people was known to God all along. However, the proclamation of Christ revealed that condition. To put it another way, the Foundation Stone was laid in Zion. To the Jews, it became a stone of

through the Law equates to a rejection of Christ Jesus as the Foundation Stone. In other words, the Jews did not attain unto righteousness because they rejected Christ Jesus. Contrary to the preaching of Law, the Gospel requires faith. It declares a Christ that cannot be seen. It proclaims His accomplishments that cannot be demonstrated in the flesh. It also presumes the deadness and alienation of all people. In such a Gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, and it is refreshing to all who believe it. To them, it chronicles righteousness for all those who believe. What a blessed message!

## THE ONE WHO BELIEVES

<sup>3b</sup> **“And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”** Other versions read, “*He who believes in Him will not be disappointed*”<sup>NASB</sup> “*the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame*,”<sup>NIV</sup> “*And whosoever believeth in him shall not be confounded*,” Duoy-Rheims “*he who relies on this will not be brought to disgrace*.”<sup>NJB</sup>

The text is a loose quotation, but gives the precise sense, of Isaiah 45:17. “*But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end.*” Isaiah 54:4 also reads, “*Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame.*” Speaking of those who put

their trust in the Lord, Joel said, “*Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame*” (Joel 2:27).

#### BELIEVING ON HIM

Believing on Christ is not mere intellectual assent, or casual agreement. Believing on Christ is trusting Him to save, depending on Him for righteousness. Believing involves the abandonment of self-confidence and total dependency on Christ to do in us what He has been ordained to do.

This is the work of God – to believe on His Son. “*This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent*” (John 6:29). No accomplishments have been

achieved until we are brought to believe on Christ! What is more, it is “*given unto*” us to believe (Phil 1:29). When those with tender hearts hear the Gospel of Christ they believe “*through grace*” (Acts 18:27). Those who “*believe on Him*” receive the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). Such will be saved (Acts 16:31). In accordance with our text, righteousness will be imputed to those who “*believe on Him who raised Jesus from the dead*” (Rom 4:24). The end, or objective, of believing on Christ is nothing less than “*eternal life*” (1 Tim 1:16).

To “*believe on Him*” is to take hold of what He says, refusing to let it go. It is to seek refuge in Him for protection, and expect to be “*made the righteousness of God in Him*” (2 Cor 5:21). Believing on

Him is cleaving to Him with “purpose of heart” (Acts 11:23). It is depending upon His guidance and craving His Person.

**Believing brings God’s righteousness to us** – the righteousness the Israelites missed because they did not seek it by faith. How gloriously and refreshingly this is stated in the next chapter of Romans. “For with the heart one **believes unto righteousness**” (10:10). Others versions read, “For it is with your heart that you **believe and are justified**.”<sup>NIV</sup> “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.”<sup>NAU</sup> “For with the heart man has **faith to get righteousness**.”<sup>BBE</sup> “For it is **by believing in your heart that you are made right with God**.”<sup>NLT</sup>

Faith, or believing on Jesus, enables the individual to appropriate the righteousness of God now. It also empowers us to “wait for the hope of righteousness” (Gal 5:5). This is “the righteousness for which we hope.”<sup>NIV</sup> We have it now by imputation, we will have it in the world to come by nature, with no competing influences.

**NOT PUT TO SHAME**

“And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” The word “shame” means dishonored, caused to blush, or confounded. The promise is that no person will be disadvantaged by believing on Christ. Those who choose to trust in Him as He is revealed through the Gospel

will never be confounded or abashed because of it.

Trusting the Lord is never a disappointing experience! God will not allow those who believe on His Son to be put to shame, embarrassed, or confounded

will respond there is no way to know for sure what God is going to do, and therefore we cannot trust Him. But flesh is wrong! We can trust Him! When we trust the Lord to do what He desires, whether in us or in others, we will not be put to shame because of it. **The Lord**

**Trusting the Lord is never a disappointing experience! God will not allow those who believe on His Son to be put to shame, embarrassed, or confounded by life’s circumstances.**

by life’s circumstances. The idea is that when we trust the Lord, He does in and for us what He has said He will do. We **will** “receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting” (Luke 18:30).

Allow me to be even more specific in this matter. This, I believe, is the sense of the text. The living God has been represented as having mercy on whomever He wills to have mercy. Freely, it is declared that He has compassion on anyone He desires. He hardens whom He wills, even raising up men like Pharaoh in order to make His power known, and have His name proclaimed throughout the entire world.

Can we trust a God like that? Flesh

**never works against those who trust in Him!** That is something every soul must grasp.

The revelation of God is brought to its peak in Christ Jesus. There God is seen most clearly, and what He declares is understood most precisely. Because the “fulness of the Godhead” dwells in Him bodily (Col 2:9), He most accurately projects the Person and purpose of God.

Therefore, when we believe on Him, God will see to it we are not disappointed, ashamed, or confounded. No one will come short of the righteousness of God who believes on His Son. Of that, you may be sure! God has promised, and He cannot lie.

**CONCLUSION**

Again, we have plowed in a field that has been left fallow by the professed church. Because of this, many souls have been left impoverished, weak in the faith, and confused by the working of the Lord. The pursuit of righteousness by means of a law is not at all uncommon. Countless believers are relying upon procedures, rule-keeping, and institutional membership for righteousness. But no person can be made righteous, or acceptable to God, by such means.

The Law given to Israel was the best of all moral codes. When it comes to being

regulated by law, there is no better law than the one given to Israel. As it is written, “And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?”<sup>NIV</sup> (Deut 4:8). If this is the means by which righteousness is attained, it would have come through the Law of Moses. As it is written, “For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law” (Gal 3:21).

What men needed was a “better covenant,” not a better law! They needed

“better sacrifices,” not a better law. We needed blood that spoke better things “than that of Abel” – blood that did not cry out for judgment and condemnation but for life and righteousness (Heb 12:24). Praise God, that is precisely what we receive in Christ Jesus. It is what is announced in “the glorious Gospel of the blessed God” (1 Tim 1:11).

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

What is the relationship of all of this to the condition of the Israelites, Paul’s “kinsmen according to the flesh”? Much every way! First, we must not be so foolish



as to imagine God has repudiated them. He can have mercy on whomever He wills, and who is willing to say God will never again have mercy upon Israel? Divine acceptance is based upon faith, not achievements. If, therefore, the Gentiles could appropriate righteousness by faith, and without seeking after it, what law of reason would lead men to believe such a blessing is not possible for the Israelites?

This subject will be developed extensively in the next two chapters. A

foundation has been put in place in preparation for that development. The Spirit will build upon the marvelous realities declared in this ninth chapter.

The Lord has revealed things difficult for the flesh to receive, and He will show us greater things. He is calling upon us to trust the Lord – to believe on Him. Throughout this book, faith has been set forth as effectual. It obtains what no law can bring to you. It is always honored and blessed by God. We see it in Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob. It can be seen in the Gentiles, who attained to righteousness by faith. It can also be seen in Paul, who was transformed by the grace of God.

The Gospel of Christ is God's power in order to salvation. It remains that power "to the Jew first." It is laden with good things to be believed, and marvelous promises to be obtained – "to the Jew first." There is no reason why we cannot join Paul in the consideration of Israel. We can also participate in His promises.

**Our next Hungry Saints Meeting will be held on Friday, 4/20/2001. Continuing in our overview of the book of Romans, we will be covering verses 1-13 of the tenth chapter. The theme will be, "A HOPE-DRIVEN PRAYER FOR ISRAEL." The desire for Israel to be saved is based upon a solid perception of the means by which men are made righteous. Showing that means to be infinitely more than a mere theological stance, Paul connects it with his fervent desire for the salvation of Israel. We do well to join him in this desire. Our meeting will convene at 7:00 P.M. You are invited to bring your family and friends for fellowship around the Word of God. Refreshments are served afterward, with a time of extended fellowship for everyone.**

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COMMENTARY on Romans: <http://wotruth.com/Romans.htm>