

## **Romans: Why Would Someone Reject Salvation?**

**Romans 9:30-33**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 9. When last we were together, we were in Romans 9, verses 22 through 29 in which Paul stressed the fact that God has a purpose: to reveal the glory of His mercy against the backdrop of evil. How timely that word of Paul was for us last week as we gathered in the wake of terror and tragedy in New York City and in Washington. We've entered into a new era and we feel that acutely. As Americans and as Christians and we were comforted by God's word. God is in control. God's plan is not thwarted. God's purposes are the same and His purpose is to reveal the glory of His mercy even against the backdrop of evil.

But as we prepare to look at this next section in Romans 9, the last few verses of this great chapter, it would be good for us to look back at the bigger picture that Paul has been addressing so far, and to ask ourselves a couple of questions. One question is, why is Paul talking about Israel at all in Romans 9, 10, and 11 in the center of this great book? Most of you know that beginning in chapter 12, he picks up what we might call a practical section of the book in which he addresses Christians about matters of Christian living. In chapters 1 through 8, he had been dealing with a variety of theological matters, but especially the teaching of justification by grace through faith. You may be asking yourself, "Why in the world is Paul even talking about Israel in Romans 9 through 11? How does that relate to what goes before this and how does it relate to what comes after it, and that's a good question. I think there are basically two answers to that. First of all, Paul is talking about Israel in Romans 9, 10, and 11 because of a very practical problem, and that is that Israel, who had received the promises of God through Abraham had not embraced Him who was the embodiment of those promises, the Lord Jesus Christ. By and large, in Jesus' day, and in Paul's day, the mass of Israel had turned their back on the claims of Jesus as the Messiah. You know, this is a very significant fact, Paul had just in Romans chapter 8 been assuring believers that they never need to fear being abandoned or deserted by God because God is powerful and God had made promises. But God was powerful in the Old Testament and He made promises in the Old Testament and Paul's already introduced in Romans chapter 9 verses 1 through 5 the fact that, by and large, Israel has turned their back on Christ and has not come to the fruition of

the promises made in the Old Testament to Abraham. So Paul needs to explain that particular issue. So, what Paul is talking about in Romans 9, 10, and 11 is not disconnected with what he's been talking about in Romans 8.

But let's go further back because there is a second reason why Paul's comments about Israel in Romans 9 through 11 are very germane in the rest of the book and that's simply this. Paul has been talking about justification by grace through faith alone, and in the very passage that we are going to study today, he raises this reality that Israel, in his own time, sought to be right with God by works and not by faith. And therefore the case of Israel is directly related to what Paul has been teaching about how a person can be right with God. You are either right with God by His grace through faith alone, or through some other way, but it can't be both as far as the Apostle Paul is concerned. And he's going to tell us in the very passage that we study today, that Israel sought to be right with God through works, and not through Jesus Christ, and not through faith alone. And so for both these reasons, it's very, very practical for Paul to be speaking about Israel in this passage.

Now, you'll also remember that as Paul raises the question in Romans 9 verses 1 through 5, why is it that Israel has turned her back on the promises of God? The first answer he gives in Romans 9 verses 6 through 29 is God's sovereignty. First, he points us in the direction of God's sovereign mercy and he says, "Look, God's grace is God's choice." That's a very hard lesson to swallow for many, many people, and of course he explains two or three things to help mitigate the force of that very powerful teaching. He says, for instance, God's choice is not arbitrary, and he makes it clear that God's judgment is always just; it's never unfair. He makes it clear that God's electing mercy isn't about fairness; it's about mercy. It's a sovereign act of grace and mercy; it's not about fair. Fair is Hell. Salvation, that's in a different category than fairness, that's the category of mercy.

And that might lead some of you to think, "Where does Paul leave us room for man's responsibility? Where does Paul leave us room for faith?" Well, he starts right here. From Romans 9 verses 6 through 29, Paul emphasizes the sovereignty of God in this current situation with Israel. Then, in Romans 9 verse 30 through Romans 10 verse 21, he emphasizes man's responsibility. For Paul those two things aren't contradictory, they work side by side, they are compatible, they are not in opposition.

And so, having told us as the first part of his answer to the question, why has Israel turned his back on the promises on God, having given the first part of that by saying you have to look at God's sovereignty, he now turns to the second part of the answer. And that is, you have to look at man's responsibility. That's where we are today. Let's hear God's holy word.

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness,

attained righteousness, even the righteousness, which is by faith; but Israel pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

Amen. This is God's word, may He as His blessing to it. Let's pray.

O Lord, we ask that You would open our eyes and our ears, and our hearts to receive Your word of truth from the holy Scripture. By the Spirit you would apply it to us and that we would be quick not to think how it applies to others, but to see its application to ourselves that we might embrace Jesus by faith as He is offered in the gospel. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Why would someone reject salvation? Have you ever thought about that? Why would someone reject salvation? That's the question that Paul is talking about in these verses, except it's even more pointed than that. Paul is asking, "Why would a religious person reject salvation? Why would God's covenant people, schooled in God's law, taught by God's prophets who had read the writings of the Old Testament, who had recited the Psalms of praise of David, why would they reject salvation? Why would someone whose focus in life was to be in fellowship with God, why would someone whose focus in life to be obedient to God, why would a person like that reject salvation?" That's a hard question. It's a hard question, not only because it is perplexing to the mind, why would somebody do that, but because it was a reality. You see, for the people of God who had been given the Scripture of the Old Testament and the predictions of the Messiah had, by and large, closed their ears to the gospel that the apostles were preaching. They had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, they had rejected the gospel that Jesus Christ was the only way of salvation, and Paul was broken hearted over it, as we saw in Romans 9 verses 1 through 5. So he raises this issue for us again at the end of the chapter and he asks us to scratch our heads with him for a few minutes and ask, "Why would someone reject salvation?"

### **I. Unbelieving Israel has not found right standing with God, but the believing Gentiles have.**

I'd like to say two or three things in response to that this morning. The first you'll see in verse 30 and 31. Paul is stating the question for us there. He's recapitulating the argument that he had introduced in the first part of the chapter, and he's asking us to think with him, "What are we to make of this fascinating situation?" What has in fact come about, Paul says, is not what we would have expected. We would have expected a mass of Israel to embrace Jesus as the Messiah. We would have expected the Gentiles to be resistant to Him, but what we found, in fact, was just what Isaiah was telling us this morning, that the

foreigners, the nations are flocking to Him, but the complacent people of God are turning their ears against Him. They are turning their hearts against Him. What are we to make of this fascinating situation? The Gentiles have come to the righteousness, which is by faith and yet Israel has not attained the righteousness of the law. Unbelieving Israel has not found right standing with God, but believing Gentiles have found right standing with God. What are we to make of this situation? Now, Paul has already started answering that question for us in Romans 9, 6 through 29. He said, well, first you have to look at God's sovereignty. God has a purpose even in the rejection of Jesus by Israel, and that purpose is to reveal His mercy.

Now, he says, the second part of that answer you have to look for in man's responsibility. That's the focus of Paul's argument in Romans 9 verse 30 through Romans 10 verse 21. He's going to emphasize here human responsibility and the centrality of faith. He says, if you want to understand why Israel rejected the Messiah, why Israel rejected salvation, then you have to understand something about faith, and so here in Romans 9, 30 through 31, Paul is recapitulating his concern and he's highlighting this irony that pagans, who cared nothing about righteousness, have obtained right standing with God, whereas the people of God have not, they've missed it. And he's raising this very difficult question.

But even in raising the question in verses 30 and 31, he is reminding us that God's sovereignty is compatible with man's responsibility; it is not contradictory of it. You see, Paul is not saying, "Ok now, some of you can believe Romans 9, 6 through 29, and then others of you can believe Romans 9, 30 through 10, 21. You can believe either way, God is either sovereign or man is responsible." Paul doesn't ever pause to see any kind of contradiction here, and as far as Paul is concerned both of these things are perfectly compatible and both are absolutely true. God is sovereign. God's grace is God's choice, but man is responsible and, we must believe. It is precisely in the failure of Israel to believe, and in the believing of the Gentiles, that we see this tremendous distinction. God is sovereign and man is responsible, and God's mercy is not exhausted even in the saving of the Gentiles.

It's so surprising, you never would have thought it, but that's precisely how God chose to reveal His mercy. And so he begins to ask the question and answer the question, why, in verse 32, and that's the second thing I'd like you to see.

## **II. This is because Israel sought right standing in the wrong way.**

Here Paul asks, why did this happen? Why did it happen this way? Why did Israel reject salvation? And he gives us a two-part answer. He says that they rejected salvation because they sought it the wrong way, and because they rejected the Savior. They rejected salvation because they sought it the wrong way, by works, and because they rejected the Savior, Christ crucified. In other

words, Paul is saying that Israel sought right standing with God the wrong way.

What led to this disaster? How could God's people miss the mark so badly? Paul's answer, part one, look at the first words of verse 32. "Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works." Israel sought right standing with God the wrong way; they sought it by works.

You know, that's an amazing thing Paul is saying, that there is a wrong way to seek fellowship with God. That thought is antithetical to our generation and culture. We figure, if a person is seeking God, he's going to find Him. If a person wants to be a follower of God, God is just totally happy with it. There are many ways up the mountain, how many times have you heard that in the last twelve days? All religions are the same, everybody who seeks God is a child of God, and the Apostle Paul is here in verse 32 saying, "Wrong, there is a right way to seek fellowship with God, and there is a wrong way." The wrong way is by works, and he is saying precisely what the Israel of his own day did. They sought right standing with God by their own works.

Now, people who seek salvation, people who seek right standing with God by works usually make along with that two other mistakes. First of all, they underestimate their own sin. They do not see themselves as sinners in the way that the Bible sees them as sinners, they discount their sin, they underplay their sin, they ignore their sin, they see themselves as basically good people. You know, we can look at those who perpetrated the acts in Washington and New York, and it's perfectly clear in our minds that they are sinners, but you see, there is often a mind set among us that they're the sinners, but we're not. We do much more respectable sins than they do. Our sins are certainly less displeasing to the Lord, we think. Surely we have not been so bad as to deserve God's judgment in condemnation, but the Apostle Paul has reminded us over and over that there is none righteous, no, not one. So, the sinner that thinks he is going to save himself by works, the first thing he does is he under estimates his sin.

Secondly, he underestimates the cost of salvation. He underestimates the cost of grace, he thinks that by doing a few things he can make up for the few foibles of his past. Not only does he refer to his sin as mistakes, not only does he downplay and sanitize his sin and make it respectable, but he also downplays the cost of salvation. The Apostle Paul says, that's impossible because Christ Himself is the price that the Father has paid for salvation. So salvation is the costliest thing in the world, even though it is offered freely to you, and the one who desires to save himself by works doesn't reckon with either of those things.

Now there are not many of us in a polite, Christianized, Southern culture, who would just come right out and say, "I'm not a sinner, and I don't need to be saved by Jesus Christ," but, there are a lot of people who think that. They think of other people as sinners. They think of other people who need Jesus Christ, and they believe that they are able to do certain things in order to accrue God's favor to

them. They believe, in effect, that they can earn God's favor through doing certain acts; being obedient, keeping certain stipulations or rituals, or ceremonies, and the Apostle Paul is saying that is precisely the mistake the Israel of his own day made, and therefore they missed salvation, they rejected it.

Now, the second thing that he has to say you'll see in the second half of verse 32. Look at those words: Paul succinctly says, "They stumbled over the stumbling stone." Now, you know that *the stumbling stone* is a favorite Old Testament reference to Jesus Christ, and you'll find it in the Psalms. We quoted a psalm this morning in the call to worship, which refers to Jesus as that cornerstone that was rejected by the builders, and a symbol of the stumbling stone was often applied by the New Testament writers to the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, Paul is saying here that Israel could not accept Christ and His cross. You see, there are always people who are looking for a way into fellowship with God that short circuits or goes around the cross. They want a relationship with God, but apart from Jesus Christ, and apart from the cross. And the Apostle Paul says, there is no such thing, and it's vitally important for us to think about right now, my friends.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. That is not a popular thing to say. It's not even a popular thing to say in the wake of the tragedy last week. How many people have we had assure us that all religions are the same? All roads lead up the mountain. There are many ways into fellowship with God, Jesus Christ is one way, but there are others, and here the Apostle Paul is saying that it is a stumbling stone to think that there is any way into fellowship with God apart from Jesus Christ. He is asserting that there is a wrong way into fellowship with God, and that wrong way is by your own works, by your own merits, by your own efforts and apart from Jesus Christ. And there is a right way, and it is by faith alone, in Christ alone, and it's just that simple.

The apostle is saying, if you are trying to enter into a fellowship with a living God, (let's stop picking on Israel of Paul's day for a minute and let's pick on ourselves, because what Paul is saying here applies to everyone if you are trying to enter into a fellowship with the living God apart from Jesus Christ) there is no hope. Why? Because you're a sinner, you are the problem. You're the problem. Jesus is the solution to the problem that you have caused. The problem can't solve itself; only Jesus can solve this problem, and so we must except Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel, or we must part with salvation. That's the mystery here.

Why would religious people reject salvation? Because they began to trust in their own goodness, and they began to discount their need of God's grace. That's why someone would reject salvation, because the gospel is offensive. Paul didn't go out and market test. He didn't data test this gospel and find out that nine out of ten in the test market really respond affirmatively to the idea that salvation is by grace alone, that we're all sinners and that we need Jesus Christ

to die for us in order to be saved. That's the most offensive message in the world if you listen to it. If you're a natural man it offends your pride, because it says that you're such a sinner that you need a Savior like that to save. It offends your character, it offends your person, but it's the way of salvation, it's the word of grace. Paul didn't test it to see if people liked it, because it's the truth. It still offends people today, and it still will offend, and it will increasingly offend them. In fact, people who claim that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation are sure to be targeted as the terrorist of the future, because we have people running around, all around us saying, the problem is that people out there believe that truth has a capitol 'T' on it. When all truth is truth, many different truths are truths, contradictory truths are truths, and only reasonable people can possibly get along, people agree truth is relative. Other people say, "You know, the first step to terrorism is somebody that thinks there is only one way to God, so we've got to wipe out everybody who believes there is only one way to God," and so they begin to relativize the teaching of Scripture. And the Apostle Paul doesn't back down an inch here. Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.

### **III. Christ is appointed for the rise and fall of many in Israel, and beyond.**

And then he gives an Old Testament quote to prove that this would be the case, in verse 33, where you'll see the third thing that Paul says in this passage. He says, the Old Testament predicted that Christ would both be a stumbling block and the way of salvation; that many would take offense at Him, but also those that trust in Him would be saved. Look at what he says, "Behold I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense." There is the negative side; He is going to be one upon whom some stumble. Here's the positive side, "and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." In other words, Jesus would simultaneously be one who would be rejected by His people and would become the occasion of them taking offense, and at the same time, He would be the very heart of salvation of those who believe in Him.

Now isn't it interesting? In Luke chapter 2, you remember Luke chapter 2, you probably read it every year at Christmas time. It's that wonderful passage you probably still have ringing in your ears, that says when Caesar sent out for all the world to be taxed and everyone went unto his own city, and etcetera, etcetera. Only, if you look all the way down to verse 34 in that chapter, you will find an interesting verse. Mary and Joseph have taken baby Jesus to Simeon to be blessed, and Simeon lays his hand on the child, and he looks into Mary's eyes, and he says to Mary, "This one is appointed for the rise and the fall of many in Israel." You see what he's saying: he is saying that he recognized that the Messiah will both be the occasion of salvation and destruction of many in Israel, and what will be the difference? Believing on Him or rejecting Him. Trusting in our own works, or trusting in His works. Trying to save ourselves, or acknowledging that we can't save ourselves and that only He can save us, and that will be the difference, and that is precisely what Paul is saying.

Why would someone reject salvation? Because they refuse to acknowledge their need and they refuse to put their hope in Jesus Christ. That's why salvation is offensive. It's offensive to say that you need to be saved, but it's the truth of the gospel, Paul says, and all those who embrace Jesus Christ find that the word of warning and judgment in the gospel is but a word of blessing because it has driven them from themselves and from their sin to Jesus Christ and to His salvation. Salvation, Paul is saying, is in Jesus Christ alone.

How do you reject salvation? You reject Christ; you refuse to believe on Him, and my friends, that is a challenge for us today. That's a challenge for people who are religious people who have grown up in the church. Will we acknowledge that Jesus Christ alone is the way into a saving fellowship with God? Will we trust in Him alone, as He is offered in the gospel for salvation? That's what Paul is saying, Paul is standing before you and saying this today. My dear friend, Douglas McMillan, who in his own time was perhaps the greatest evangelist in Scotland, had in his pre-Christian days been a great athlete. He was a massive man, and he tossed the caber and he threw the hammer, and he did all those heavy lifting Highland sports, and he could have been a national champion in it. He eventually became a Christian, but his struggle to become a Christian was hard, partly because he did not want to let go of so many things in his life in which he took pleasure. He was a ladies man, and he was known to be a hard drinker as well, and he liked his life style. He liked being a man's man, and he liked doing what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it, how he wanted to do it, with no accountability to anyone. And the minister who came to speak with him about the gospel really challenged him with that, and he said to him one day, he said, "Douglas, in this hand I'll give you Christ, and in this hand, I'll give you everything that you think you have to give up in order to embrace Christ. Which is it going to be? Christ or everything else?" Douglas, reflecting on that, later looked back and he said, "You didn't make it easy on me, and I'm so thankful"

That's a problem with so many in the church today, they want Christ, but they want everything else too. You see, Christ, plus this is Hell. Christ plus our works is Hell. Christ plus anything else is Hell. It's Christ alone, faith alone, in Christ alone. That's salvation, Paul says, and that's the choice that's before every one of us. Will we trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation? That's the difference. Why would someone reject salvation? Because they cannot come to the realization that they are a sinner in need of grace, and so trust in the only One who can deliver them. Why does a person come to salvation? Because by the mercy of God, He opens their eyes to see both their sin, and their Savior, and so to trust in Him. May God enable you to trust in Him who is the only way to salvation. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, keep us near the cross of Christ, however offensive it may be to the world, remind us that is the only way. He is the only way, and the way is the way of faith, for our deeds will not avail, only His deeds. These things



we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

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