

ROMANS

Part 21: “Sent by a Sovereign God”

Romans 9:30–10:21

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Scripture Reading

“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for ‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.’ But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, ‘I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.’ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’” But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people’” (Rom 9:30–10:21).

Almighty and everlasting God, may your inspired words go forth and be illuminated in our hearts so that your word might be proclaimed with our lips and displayed in our lives. In the name of Jesus, our savior, we pray, AMEN.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how a church is born?

The eighteenth chapter of Acts tells recounts one story of how a church comes into existence. Paul is on his second missionary journey. He arrives in the Greek city of Corinth while on the run from some of his Jewish adversaries in the region nearby. As per his custom, he attends the local Jewish synagogue to worship the Lord. While there, he reads from the Old Testament scriptures and testifies to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. Some Jewish people come to saving faith in Jesus, but, sadly, many others oppose and revile Paul for his teaching of the gospel.

Now, it's important to note that, during the course of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys, the most violent opposition he experiences has typically come from Jewish religious leaders. They have literally run Paul out of town on numerous occasions. Once, they even marshaled a mob to stone him and leave him for dead (Acts 14:19). Nevertheless, Paul has also witnessed the Spirit of God move in such a way that many people from gentile nations have begun to follow Jesus. New churches have been planted in places once dominated by pagan idolatry. Despite all the resistance, the gospel has gone forth!

So, at this point in the city of Corinth, one might expect Paul to think, "Well, here we go again. I better pack my bags and get ready to go before these guys try to kill me." But that evening, the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision. He says, "*...Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people*" (Acts 18:9–10).

God is telling Paul, "I have many people who are in this city. I died for these people that they might live. These people just don't yet know they are mine yet. They not looking for me yet. They don't even know to look for me yet (cf. Rom 10:20). But I will find them. And I've chosen *you* to go tell them this good news!"

Paul is then able to continue his ministry with a renewed sense of confidence. His evangelistic confidence comes not despite—but *because of*—the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Paul now possesses theologically motivated confidence that moves him to action despite great opposition and discouragement. So, Paul stays in Corinth for a year and a half, and he plants one of the most important churches in all of history—the church of Corinth.

And, a few short years after the church of Corinth is born, he will again visit the church this church he planted. And it will be while he is in Corinth that he will write his famous letter to the church of Rome—the very letter we read from today.

I mention this story because it is a vivid illustration of many of the truths we will encounter in our reading from the book of Romans today. In the story of the church of Corinth, we see how many Jewish leaders sadly reject the gospel, while many gentiles come to saving faith. We see that God has set his love on his people before they even realize they are his people. But even more, we see how God has appointed the ministry of the gospel as the sovereignly ordained means through which his people will come to faith. In other words, this passage is showing us we are not only saved by a sovereign God. We are also *“Sent by a Sovereign God.”*

We'll unpack what that means today as we walk through yet another lengthy passage of Romans. And we will organize our discussion under three main headings: *1.) The Scandal of the Gospel, 2.) The Simplicity of Faith, 3.) The Sent-ness of the Church.*

Exposition

1.) The Scandal of the Gospel

Why is it the case that some people hear the gospel and then dismiss it, while others hear the same gospel, and it changes their lives? As it relates to this text, why are so many of Paul's fellow Jewish people rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ, while so many people from non-Jewish gentile nations are embracing the gospel in droves?

Paul begins to answer that question in the last few verses of Romans chapter 9: *“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’” (Rom 9:30–33).*

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the light. None come to the Father except through him (John 14:6). So for those who wish to trust in a salvation that is based on works of the law, Christ becomes a stone of stumbling and scandal (σκανδάλου) instead of a source of salvation (Rom 9:33).

Paul goes on to say, *“Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness” (Rom 10:1–3).*

The people Paul is talking about know a lot *about* God. But they do not know God or submit to God. And tragically, they have harnessed their knowledge about God into fueling a religion of human performance in an attempt to earn the favor and love of God.

During Paul's lifetime, this tendency to pursue a works-based righteousness was a particular challenge for Jewish people. But I want to be very clear: the temptation to establish our own righteousness is not an exclusively Jewish temptation. It is a *human* temptation.

Something in our flesh wants credit for the good we do. We want our good works, our hard efforts, and our noble intentions to count for something. There may even be a secret desire to put God into our debt. Perhaps we feel that if we try hard enough, God would be obligated to bless us in the way we see fit.

Or, maybe we take a more moderate view. We know our works are good enough to save us by themselves, but we at least deserve partial credit, right? We run as fast and long as we can, and then Jesus takes the baton and finishes the race for us.

But any view of salvation based on human works is a version of karma and is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any view of salvation that seeks to establish a righteousness of our own misses the point of the gospel, which is the righteousness of God in Christ! As Paul says in verse 4, "*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes*" (Rom 10:4).

Now, I'm not saying that Christian obedience doesn't matter. Christians are certainly called to obey the God who saved us! We are called to live in a way that is empowered by the resurrection of Jesus and the righteousness of God! So, it is not that our good works are unimportant—they just aren't what *save* us. *Jesus* saves us!

We cannot live in perfect conformity to the law of Moses (cf. Rom 10:5). We cannot work our way to the heights of heaven. We cannot descend to the depths of the abyss and overcome the power of death (cf. Rom 10:6). But the good news is that Christ has already accomplished our redemption.

All we bring to our salvation is our brokenness and the recognition of our brokenness. All we bring is the empty hands of faith that are willing to receive a love we cannot earn and a grace we cannot deserve. But we need eyes that are unveiled by the Holy Spirit in order to see the beauty and glory of this truth (cf. 2 Cor 3:16).

The gospel is scandalous because the cross of Jesus Christ exposes the insufficiency of our own righteousness. Yet, the stone that was a stumbling block has become the very rock of salvation for those who will simply believe (cf. 1 Pet 2:6–7). That, of course, leads us to our second point.

2.) The Simplicity of Faith

In our journey throughout Romans, I have described this book as Paul's longest and most theologically ornate letter. Like a symphony, Romans is composed of several distinct movements. Our text from today's reading is situated in the most difficult movement of Paul's master symphony.

Romans chapters 9 through 11 is dense, complicated, and difficult to understand. We at once are confronted with the mysteries of divine sovereignty and election, as well as Paul's lamentation for the Jewish people who seem to be rejecting their Messiah.

But right in the middle of one of the most complex sections in the New Testament, there is a calm in the storm. And all at once, we are reminded of the simplicity of faith.

Paul writes, *"But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame'" (Rom 10:8–11).*

The beauty of the gospel is that is simple enough for a child to truly know and believe, yet it is so profound that the greatest of all theologians are unable to plumb the depths of its glory.

The mystery of God's sovereignty is not meant to be fully understood—it is meant to reveal that the God of our salvation is beyond our understanding. Nevertheless, the gospel reveals that when we could not work our way to God through our good works or know him through our mental efforts, God came to us. He revealed himself perfectly in Jesus Christ.

We are not justified by our understanding of election. We are justified by our faith in Jesus. We are justified by resting in the truth that Jesus is Lord, that he died for us, that he has risen from the dead, and that he will not put us to shame.

The gospel of John records a moment in the ministry of Christ that none of the other gospels share (John 6:22–71). It's the day after one of Jesus's most famous miracles—the feeding of the five thousand. The masses again crowd around Jesus, not as much to hear him teach God's word, but because they think, if they follow Jesus around long enough, they might be in for another free meal.

Instead, Jesus confuses them. He tells them he is the bread of life that comes down from heaven. Some of the Jewish leaders get confused and offended at this saying. So, Jesus offends them more. He says that he must eat his flesh and drink his blood if they have any hope of being saved. This causes an utter scandal. But instead of clarifying his remarks, Jesus says, *"...Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe... This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father"* (John 6:61–65).

Jesus confronts his own disciples and all who hear his word with the scandalous truth that we cannot be saved by the works of the flesh and that no one can come to him

unless it is granted by the will of God the Father. And this offends people to their very core.

In fact, the gospel of John goes on to say, *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God’”* (John 6:66–69).

Peter’s response is the only right response. It is the simple faith of Romans 10:9.

I said this last week, but it bears repetition. The most important question provoked by this portion of Romans is not “Are you elect?” The central question is, “Do you believe? Do you believe the gospel? Do you believe that Jesus is enough?”

But we might ask, *how* will those who do not yet believe come to saving faith? That question leads us to our final point.

3.) The Sent-ness of the Church

Let’s pick up our reading in verse 14: *“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Rom 10:14–17).

God has a mission. He has launched a rescue operation to redeem and restore all that has been fractured and broken by the powers of sin and death. And the people of God declaring the gospel of God is the sovereignly appointed means through which the mission of God will go forth.

If you think about it, God has always worked this way. He creates the heavens and the earth, and he appoints Adam and Even, his image-bearers, to rule over creation on his behalf (Gen 1:28). He rescues Israel from slavery and gives them a promised land, and he calls them, as his people, to be a light unto the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). He sends Jesus to accomplish our redemption through his death and resurrection, and then he commissions his church to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19–20).

The people of God are not called to be mere containers of the gospel. We are called to be conduits through which the power of the gospel flows. We are called not only to be beneficiaries of God’s grace but agents of that grace within the world around us. Participation in the mission of God is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

After his dramatic conversion to Christ, Paul became a part of a multi-ethnic church in the ancient city of Antioch. The church grew rapidly, breaking down all kinds of ethnic

and cultural barriers in a way unheard of in the ancient world. In fact, it was at this church that followers of Jesus began going by a new name. For the first time in history, they were called “Christians” (Acts 11:26).

But as the leaders of this church prayed, fasted, and worshipped together, they felt God was calling them to send some of their very best leaders to plant churches and share the gospel with people who did not yet know Jesus. One of those sent leaders was Paul (Acts 13:1–3).

So too, our church congregation stands in a long line of centuries of Christians who have a desire to see the gospel go forth to those who do not yet believe. And in just a few weeks, we will also send some of our very best leaders to plant a church. J.R. and Megan Favela, Dawson and Melissas Tolley, several families from Emmanuel Church, and several members of Redeemer Christian Church will be sent to plant Citylight Church in East Amarillo. Our hope, prayer, and conviction is that through this church, people will come to know Jesus who do not yet know Jesus. We believe that the Lord has many people in the Barrio. Some of them just don’t know that they are his yet.

When you serve the church, when you give to resource the church, when you are engaged in a gospel community within the church, when you faithfully gather in worship in the church, it may feel like you are doing something that is very mundane and normal. But make no mistake, through these ordinary means of grace the extraordinary power of the gospel has gone forth and is going forth.

Nevertheless, the mission is costly. It costs financial resources. It costs time. It costs ease of relationships. I will miss regularly seeing my friend, J.R. I will miss worshipping with the several families that have felt the call to and be a part of the foundation of this new work. But the gospel is worth it. So too, we will say, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.

We are sent. But, let us remember, it isn't our job to save. Our job is to bear witness to the one who saves. Our job is to declare the gospel with our word and display the gospel with our lives, and trust that God's word will not return void. For Jesus never fails.

After all, the *sent-ness* of the people of God is rooted in God’s sending of Jesus Christ. As Theologian Edmund P. Clowney once wrote, *“Our fearful condition as lost sinners forms the dark horizon where God’s grace brings the dawn of hope. In the Bible, salvation is God’s mission to the lost world...This is the missio Dei...God accomplishes his saving mission by sending his Son into the world. Jesus is the great Missionary, sent by the Father. As Lord, Jesus comes to gather his people, and to form his disciples as a company of gatherers... Jesus came to gather, and to call gatherers, disciples who would gather with him, seeking the poor and helpless from city streets and country roads...Mission is not an optional activity for Christ’s disciples.”*¹

¹ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 159.

Conclusion

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who find our hope in a gospel that scandalizes the proud but gives grace to those who are poor in heart. May we rest in our simple yet profound faith, trusting that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. And may we embrace our call as a sent people who are commissioned to bear witness to the word of Christ to a world who needs him.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) *Read Romans 9:30–10:4. What is the reason that the people of ethnic Israel (i.e., many of the Jewish people in Paul’s time) find Christ to be “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”?*
- 2.) *In what ways are we also tempted to pursue God in a way that is based on our own works or self-established righteousness?*
- 3.) *Read Romans 10:6–13. What is the good news contained in these verses? How should this passage help us when we feel a sense of shame?*
- 4.) *Read Romans 10:14–17. What do these verses tell us about the importance of God’s people participating in God’s mission?*
- 5.) *In just two weeks, Redeemer will be praying over and sending the ministry team who will be planting Citylight Church in East Amarillo. We encourage you to spend some time this week praying for God’s blessing over J.R. Favela and this soon-to-be-born church plant.*