

Romans 9:30-33 It's all about Jesus

The heart of Romans is the grace of God for sinners. It's not cheap grace and it will cost us everything, but it is still amazing grace. We begin our walk with God by God's grace and we are sustained by that same grace day by day. But Romans is not only about grace; it is also about Jesus. In fact Jesus and Him crucified was the centre of Paul's preaching.

Romans 9:30-33 is all about Jesus. Paul is addressing the problem of unbelieving Israel. How could it be that God's chosen people Israel didn't receive Jesus as Messiah? We should note that in talking about 'unbelieving Israel' we don't mean that they were atheists. Far from it, they believed in God. It's 'just' that they didn't believe in Jesus as Messiah. The key issue in our passage is the Person of Jesus, which is why Paul says, *They stumbled over the stumbling stone* (v32).

At the heart of the matter is the identity of Jesus. This is why Jesus had to ask his disciples, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter replied, *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.* Jesus replied, *Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my faith who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church* (Matthew 16:15-18). For Israel it was Jesus and the claims He made concerning himself which became the stumbling stone. For example, Jesus said to the paralytic, *Your sins are forgiven*, and then to prove He really did have authority to forgive sins he healed him. At this the scribes were indignant because the whole episode pointed to Jesus' divinity.

In v33 Paul quotes from Scripture to back up his point, except that he doesn't quite! Rather he quotes from two Scriptures and brings them together into one, in typical rabbinic fashion. Paul has combined words from Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14 to drive home his point. Isaiah 28:16 was traditionally interpreted as Messianic. Jesus therefore is the *precious cornerstone for a sure foundation*.

Peter, the alpha male fisherman who was the first among the disciples to confess Jesus as the Christ, later called Jesus *precious* (1Peter 1:19, 2:4). Is Jesus precious to you and is He your greatest Treasure? (see Matthew 13:44). Jesus is the precious cornerstone and a sure foundation, the rock on whom the church is built (see also 1Corinthians 3:11).

But in Paul's mind the precious stone of Isaiah 28:16 was the same stone of Isaiah 8:14, *a stone of stumbling and rock of offense*. The appearing of Messiah is in fact like a two-edged sword. For those who believe He is precious; for those who reject Him He becomes the stone over which they stumble. It is interesting that the context of Isaiah 8 it clear that the stone over which both houses of Israel stumble is God. Paul naturally applies the same text to Jesus!

So it comes down to the Person of Jesus. It was C.S. Lewis who famously said that on the basis of His claims about Himself that Jesus must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or Lord. Do you believe Jesus is the Christ? Israel rejected the message. But why did they reject it?

Paul gives an answer in 9:30-32. First, he sets out the reality of the situation. *Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained it, a righteousness that is by faith* (v30). Many Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus all over the Romans world. *But Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it* (v31). (AH translates v31 as, *In pursuing **the** law of righteousness, Israel did not*

meet the law.) The law of righteousness is the Law of Moses, the Torah, the law that is holy (Romans 7:12) and is the Scripture that is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2Timothy 3:16).

Our verses describe two surprising things. The first surprise is that Gentiles who do not have this *Torah of righteousness* (i.e. the Scripture), have obtained righteousness (see Ephesians 2:12). Their only hope was to cry out to God for His mercy and put their faith in Jesus. This of course was exactly the response God was, and is looking for as we come to Him by faith.

The second surprise is that Israel who possessed the very Scriptures which spoke of this righteousness did not attain it. But the problem was not with the Bible, but it was a problem of interpretation. Jesus said to the Pharisees, *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life* (John 5:39-40). All Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. But there was a deeper meaning and purpose of the *law of righteousness*, that is to reveal Messiah: *they bear witness about Me*, said Jesus. On the road to Emmaus after the resurrection Jesus talked to two disciples, and it says, *And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them all the Scriptures the things concerning himself* (Luke 24:27). It is all about Jesus! The problem for Israel was not in my view that they pursued the Torah of righteousness, but the way they pursued it: *because they pursued it not by faith but as it were by works*. If, like Abraham, they had pursued it by faith, like Abraham it would have been *reckoned to them as righteousness*, and they would have recognised Jesus as their long awaited for Messiah. But they totally missed it.

Rather they pursued Torah *as if it were by works*. I think Paul uses *works* as shorthand for the expression *works of the law* (Note, the KJV translates *works* in 9:32 as *works of the law*.) The traditional view is that Israel was trying to earn salvation by keeping the law, now replaced by a new way of grace in Jesus. However, a document found among the Dead Sea Scrolls uses this phrase *works of the law* in such a way as to suggest Paul could have used it to describe certain ceremonial matters of law which identified a person as Jewish, such as circumcision, Sabbath and dietary laws. Paul did not devalue these ceremonial matters (Romans 3:1-2), but he argued strongly that *works of the law* (and therefore being Jewish,) did not justify a person before God. For me, this makes a lot of sense when applied to Romans and Galatians.

The heart of the matter was membership of God's people and therefore salvation. For Israel membership was about *works of the law*, which put a person inside the covenant people of God. Paul was equally concerned about membership of God's household. His radical gospel was that membership was not by works, i.e. by circumcision (or other ceremonial matters) which identified someone as or made someone Jewish, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS.

It is Jesus who makes us part of God's family through faith, and this is why He is precious.