

### C.     **Salvation History and Israel** (9:30-11:32)

The larger context of chapters 9-11 focuses on the matter of Jewish unbelief and how God's rejection of Israel is to be understood in light of His word of promise to the nation. As a first principle Paul has shown that, despite appearances, God's word has not failed. From the beginning He made known that His promise to Abraham's seed pertains to a remnant and not the whole Israelite nation. Moreover, Israel's opposition to Christ and His gospel is itself according to God's purpose; by divine design, Jewish hardness in opposing the gospel serves the fulfillment of the promise that, in Abraham, all the families of the earth are to be blessed. Israel's unbelief has provided the occasion and means for the salvation of the Gentiles.

In this way Paul addressed the Jewish situation of his day in broad, salvation-historical terms. His desire has been to demonstrate that Israel's rejection of her Messiah is no accident, but is in perfect accord with God's plan as revealed by His prophets of old. They had never deviated from the proclamation that, when Yahweh brought His everlasting kingdom in His Servant, only a remnant of Israel would be gathered into it. But this ingathering would also extend to the nations of the earth as God established a global people. In accordance with divine promise, and certified by his new name, Abraham was to be the father of a multitude of peoples as the mediator of God's blessing to all the earth's families.

#### 1.     **The Climax of Salvation History and Israel** (9:30-10:21)

What was being played out on the first-century world stage was, in every respect, a matter of fulfillment. Nothing could be further from the truth than that God's word to Israel had failed. Israel's unbelief and condemnation were themselves proof that God had kept His word. And yet, Paul was unwilling to lay the blame for the Jews' plight at the feet of God. Israel opposed Christ and His gospel, not because of necessity, but because of conscious choice. *Jewish unbelief was the result of a principle deeply ingrained in Israel's sense of its own identity and relationship with God, and it is that matter to which Paul now turned his attention.*

As numerous times before, Paul's transition here is marked by the interjection of a rhetorical question drawing upon the preceding context: "*What shall we say then?*" To this question he provides a two-fold response, the first part pertaining to the Gentiles (9:30b), and the second part to the Jews (9:31). These responses, together with the context that lies behind it, indicate that Paul's rhetorical question can be rephrased as follows: *How are we to understand the unbelief of Israel to whom God revealed Himself, and the salvation of those who had no such revelation?*

Paul's citations from the prophets are sufficient to establish the fact that God had all along spoken of the Messianic kingdom as bringing the salvation of a remnant from Israel together with a multitude of Gentiles taken from all the nations of the earth. But what the present passage importantly provides is crucial insight into the *mechanism* of that salvation. In other words, it answers the question of *how* God's promise to Abraham and his *seed* finds its ultimate fulfillment, first in the salvation of only a portion of his covenant descendents, and second in the salvation of the Gentile peoples. It explains how the *definition* of the people of God as being Abraham's offspring has not been altered, and yet that covenant household now excludes multitudes of the patriarchs' descendents and, conversely, embraces all the Gentile nations.

The explanation for this phenomenon – a phenomenon that was startling to many in Israel – is simply this: *a share in the Abrahamic promise, and so also citizenship in the Messianic kingdom, depends not upon ethnicity, covenant status through circumcision, or even adherence to the Law of Moses, but upon faith in the King of the kingdom.* From the beginning the prophets had continually declared that the eschatological kingdom would be a kingdom defined and determined by *righteousness*. Its citizens would indeed be a righteous people, but their righteousness was to be grounded in personal faith in God and His purpose and power to effect His own righteousness in sinful men. The principle of faith, rather than works in conformity to law, would define Abraham's true children, even as it characterized Abraham himself as an heir of God's promise (cf. 4:1-22; Galatians 3:1-29). And so, while Paul viewed divine sovereignty as primary in the determination of who constitutes the children of God (9:6-24), he also recognized and upheld the importance of human response to the gospel:

*“The 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.”* (9:30b-32a)

At the outset of the chapter Paul made divine **promise** the point of demarcation between those who are children of God and those who are not (9:1-8). In other words, the point of distinction among men is whether or not one stands as a recipient of God's promise. In context, this promise refers back to the promise made to Abraham and his seed. At the typological level, all the offspring of Jacob constituted the “children of promise,” as they all participated in the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant at the ethnic and physical level. But the promise of the covenant looked ultimately to a particular descendent of Abraham, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. The promise is realized in Him, with the result that all who are joined to Him – Jew or Gentile – are the true sons of Abraham and heirs of the promise. Though at the typological level all Israel *was* Israel, in the context of fulfillment all Israel is *not* Israel. Those who are truly Israel are those Jews who belong to the Seed in whom the promise is localized and realized (ref. 2:28-29). Only in that way does a Jew become a true son of Abraham. For the same reason, Gentiles are equally sons of Abraham when they, too, are joined to Christ.

From this vantage point, it is obvious why Paul associated the *promise* with *faith in Christ* and the reception of His righteousness. Regardless of ethnicity, *one becomes an heir of the promise when He is joined by faith to the One to whom the promise ultimately pertained and in whom it finds its realization.* This truth is fundamental to Paul's gospel and his understanding of the relation between God's Old Testament and New Testament peoples. Most importantly, Paul's doctrine presented nothing new; it was simply the perpetuation of Jesus' own teaching. The great point of controversy between Jesus and the Jews of His day was their opposition to Jesus' insistence that the true covenant sons of God are those who believe in Him.

- The true seed of Abraham are not those who are genetically descended from him, but those who share his faith in the promised One (John 8:31-40).
- The true disciples of Moses are those who believe Moses words – the words by which he called men to faithful adherence to the prophet like him (John 5:45-47; cf. Acts 7:17-40).

- Likewise, those who are truly obedient to God's inscripturated word are those who find revealed in it the Lord Jesus, and who therefore submit themselves to Him in faith (John 5:39-40; cf. also Luke 24:25-27; Acts 3:13-24, 10:34-43; etc.).
- Finally, those who are faithful, covenant sons of Yahweh are those who believe, honor, and serve the Son (John 5:19-24, 31-38, 8:12-19, 12:26; 1 John 3:21-24).

When Paul insisted that "*he is not a Jew who is one outwardly... but he is a Jew who is one inwardly*" – having a circumcision of the heart done by the Spirit of Christ – he was only reiterating what Jesus Himself taught. This inward renewal and transformation come through faith in the Son of Abraham, and so pertain equally to the Gentiles. They equally are sons of Abraham by sharing in his faith in God directed toward the promised Seed (ref. again 4:1-25; also Colossians 2:8-12).

- a. And so it is that God's forming His New Covenant people from a Jewish remnant in conjunction with the Gentiles points to a crucial gospel principle (hence Paul's rhetorical question, "*What shall we say then?*"). That principle is righteousness – and so also sonship – by faith, which serves to explain the winnowing of Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles. Paul first addressed its operation in relation to the *Gentiles* (9:30b), and in doing so, he set out three particulars:

- 1) The first thing he observed is that the Gentiles were not *pursuing* righteousness. Understood from one perspective, this statement appears naïve and even absurd. For all people live with the consciousness of the principle of righteousness, and every human society is ordered around the definition, establishment and enforcement of some accepted standard of righteousness. Whether in the secular or religious spheres, righteousness is central to what it means to be human.

But Paul was not speaking in these absolute terms. In context he was taking note of the fact that the Gentiles had not been governed by covenant law, as was the case with the nation of Israel (ref. 2:12-16; cf. also Ephesians 2:11-12). In that sense they were not pursuing judicial righteousness with God through striving to conform to the Law of Moses (or any other formal articulation of divine law).

- 2) But though they were not pursuing such righteousness, the Gentiles nevertheless *attained* it. The fact that people can attain a righteousness they are not pursuing has two important implications, both of which are crucial to the context and central to Paul's gospel.
  - a) The first is its emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation. It was God's purpose and power that resulted in the attainment of that which was not being sought after.
  - b) The second is its clarification of the righteousness of which Paul was speaking. The Gentiles did not obtain this righteousness through personal exertion; they gained it entirely apart from anything in themselves.

- 3) The Gentiles attained a righteousness they were not seeking after, and yet they were not removed from the transaction. They attained it through personal *faith* in Jesus Christ. This fact provides further insight into the two preceding implications, for it shows first that God's sovereignty in salvation does not operate fatalistically in a vacuum. The psalmist expressed it well: Christ's people *offer themselves freely* (literally, are a "free-will offering") in the day of *His power* (Psalm 110:1-3). Secondly, it shows that the righteousness implicated here is not moral/ethical/religious righteousness associated with human conduct; it is *God's own righteousness* bestowed upon divine image-bearers as a result of their union with the God-man. Through faith in Christ, they *become* the righteousness of God *in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

By this simple statement Paul has expressed a wealth of gospel truth. He has exalted the primacy of divine determination and power in the salvation of men, while yet upholding the crucial importance of human response (faith). Furthermore, he has pointed again to the fact that the righteousness by which people are reconciled to God and made sons is not in any way tied to them or their own efforts. In the verses to follow Paul will make clear that this righteousness is God's own (ref. 10:3). Perhaps most importantly, God's righteousness is not simply a matter of legal reckoning; it is a matter of personal transformation. That is to say, the believer possesses the righteousness of God through personal union with Christ by His Spirit (8:9-10), and this righteousness is progressively perfected in him through the Spirit's transforming work (8:29; also 2 Corinthians 3:18).

- b. Having addressed the calling of the Gentiles, Paul turned his attention to Israel and the salvation of a Jewish remnant:

*"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.'"* (9:31-33)

As personal faith in Christ explains the salvation of the Gentiles, so it explains the winnowing within Israel and how it is that "not all Israel is Israel." God was calling a remnant from within Israel (9:24, 27-29), but the nation as a collective entity stood condemned as a "vessel of wrath." The obvious contextual reason is Israel's lack of faith, but in these verses Paul moved beyond that fact to begin to explain to his Roman readers the *psychology* of Jewish unbelief. He did so by setting Israel's circumstance in antithetical contrast to that of the Gentiles.

- 1) Unlike the Gentiles, Israel sought righteousness before God. The Jewish people understood the need for righteousness in their relationship with God, and they were zealous in their pursuit of it. Paul expressed this in terms of Israel's pursuit of a "law of righteousness," a phrase that has been subject to various interpretations. In context it is arguably best to understand it as a principle of personal righteousness regarded by the Jews as standing upon blameless conformity to Israel's covenant, namely the Law of Moses (cf. 9:32 and 10:4-5).

- 2) The Gentiles, who have no covenantal relation to the Law of Moses and have undertaken no pursuit of righteousness according to law, gained righteousness. But Israel, who zealously and relentlessly sought after righteousness, did not obtain it. At this point Paul made a shift in terminology that underscores his point: the Gentiles, apart from active pursuit, *came upon* and *laid hold* of righteousness, but the sons of Israel *failed to arrive at the goal* they so ardently pursued.
- 3) The problem for Israel was not disregard for the need for righteousness before God; Paul's language makes clear that righteousness was precisely the Jews' goal. **Israel's problem – and the reason it fell short of its goal – was its insistence on establishing its own righteousness.** The psychology of Israel's unbelief is the quintessential biblical proof of the maxim that *human depravity is not defined by the hatred of righteousness, but by the hatred of the gospel*. What drives the human soul in its estrangement from God is not the quest for freedom from all righteousness, but the resolute quest for self-righteousness.

This is the underlying reason that the “stone” God placed in Zion is a “*stone of stumbling and rock of offense*” (9:33). He is as much a point of offense and stumbling to the religiously pious and morally upright as He is to the defiantly atheistic and immoral. Though each expresses his autonomy differently, all people innately refuse the righteousness of God that is by faith alone. Left to themselves, all stumble over the stone.

Paul's citation is a conflation of two related texts from Isaiah (8:14, 28:16), and together they make a profound contribution to his argument regarding Israel's rejection of Christ.

- The first is drawn from the same larger context as verses 9:27-28 (Isaiah 7-12). Recalling that this context is framed by the Immanuel prophecy given to king Ahaz, the particular statement cited by Paul (Isaiah 8:14) pertains to Judah's disbelief of God's promise of deliverance and preservation that were to come in connection with the promise of Immanuel. Ahaz' response to the growing threat of the Israelite-Syrian army was to form his own alliance with the king of Assyria, and in that way secure Judah and Jerusalem against conquest. But God's word to Ahaz was that the deliverance of David's house and throne would not come from Assyria – indeed, Assyria would march against Judah when it had overthrown Israel and Syria (8:1-8). Not the Assyrian king, but Yahweh Himself would secure Judah's deliverance in accordance with the principle of Immanuel (8:9-10).

This was Isaiah's message to the house of David, and God warned him that this word was going to be viewed as a conspiracy intended to undermine Judah's security. Rather than trusting God, Ahaz was set on finding his security in human power and wisdom (8:11-20). In this way Yahweh would become for both houses of Israel a “*stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.*” Because they refused to look to Him for their deliverance and well-being, Judah and Israel would be destroyed in their unbelief. But for those who entrusted themselves to Him – represented in context by Isaiah and his “children” – Yahweh would become a *sanctuary*; a place of sure refuge.

- The second part of Paul's citation is taken from Isaiah 28:16. This passage is part of a context in which God was promising His judgment on the two kingdoms of Israel (Ephraim) and Judah because they had forsaken Him to pursue their own, self-serving idols (28:1-13). Ephraim was to be taken captive, and Judah scourged, by the Assyrians. But even so, Judah was committed to trusting in her human alliances and human counselors. Rather than making the true and living God their rock, the rulers of Judah had taken refuge in falsehood and self-deception (28:14-15).

The historical and prophetic contexts of these two Isaiah passages are related, but the obvious basis for Paul's conflation is the "stone" imagery. Nonetheless, the connection is more than simply terminology common to both. **Paul linked them together because of the significance of the "stone" to Israel and its unbelief.** In the former passage the stone symbolism emphasizes the ideas of *strength*, *refuge*, and *security*, whereas the emphasis of the latter is upon the metaphor of the *cornerstone*. A cornerstone was prepared and laid as the foundation for a building, and the idea is that the soundness, stability, and "trueness" of the whole structure derived from the same qualities in the cornerstone: "*Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed.*"

Though the contextual emphases differ slightly, in both passages the stone represents something in which God's people are to place their trust and confidence. They are to find in this stone (who in the first context is Yahweh Himself), all their security and hope, as opposed to seeking these things in men and human resource. Those who *believe* in this way that God is their deliverer and provider and *entrust* themselves to Him will find Him to be a true sanctuary; they will not be disturbed in their security.

Like their forefathers in Israel and Judah, the Jews of the first century stumbled over Yahweh's provision of deliverance and well-being. But now, in the era of fulfillment, that provision no longer pertained merely to physical deliverance from physical enemies. In the context of Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy, Yahweh had promised to be Judah's sanctuary "rock," and now He had fulfilled His promise in Immanuel. Yahweh the Son – "God with us" – came into the world in the fullness of the times, and He has come as the promised precious and tested cornerstone upon which the household of God is to be built (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10)

And as promised, this Rock had become to the two houses of Israel a *stone of stumbling* and *rock of offense*. Like an unseen stone on the path, they stumbled over Him because they did not see Him for what He is. But they did not miss Him because He had not revealed Himself openly and clearly; Israel missed Him because they found Him to be a "rock of offense." Christ offended Israel because His presence and message opposed their confident self-righteousness. He refused to afford them the righteousness they so readily afforded themselves as sons of Abraham and disciples of Moses (ref. again 10:1-4; cf. also Matthew 3:4-10; John 9:24-41; Philippians 3:1-6). Israel's offense at Yahweh's appointed "rock" was born out of conscious unbelief, and all unbelief is rooted in self-righteousness. This is the great enemy of men – the enemy that only divine grace can overcome (Psalm 118:1-29).