

The Stone of Stumbling

Romans 9:24-33

I have a daughter with Angelman Syndrome. One of her disabilities is that her muscles do not have fine dexterity. Therefore, she is prone to tripping and falling. It is important for her to keep walking, but if she were to trip and fall, she could very easily sprain her ankle. If she did this enough, she could lose her ability to walk altogether.

So, what do we do? We are constantly looking out for her. We try to anticipate the ground where she could trip. Most of the time, we just try to avoid those dangers. But sometimes we take the time to remove them.

One example of this was at the back entrance of the Church. The sidewalk had sunk at the back door such that there was a 1 inch difference between the two pieces of concrete. It was just enough of a difference that you could trip, but not so much that it was easily visible. It was a constant fear that I had that Ginny would trip. So, at a work day, we dug out from under the concrete, jacked up the whole slab, and then filled in the space with rocks and new concrete. Problem fixed!

We only did what anyone who truly cares would do, right?
Remove the obstacle that might cause someone to stumble.

As Christians, we are to have such concern for our brothers and sisters that even if we have a right to do something, but it might cause another to stumble, we should abstain from doing it. This is what love requires.

Who would ever think that God, in His providence, would Himself place a stone of stumbling in front of the feet of his own people, those he loves? And yet, that is exactly what God does.

Look at Romans 9:33.

"Behold, I (the LORD) am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling

Who and what is the stone of stumbling? And why would God lay a stone in our path such that we trip over it? And how can we learn to not trip over the stone, but rather find in it our true redemption?

Read Romans 9:23-33.

Romans 9:23 ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory -

God wants all of his children to know that they are vessels of mercy. They are being prepared for glory by God's Sovereign Grace. They are not saving themselves. They are being saved by a supernatural and eternal love, richly and freely poured out upon them through no merit of their own.

God is so intent upon all of his children knowing his Sovereign Love that He is willing for them to fall flat on their faces to get the point.

God places a stone of stumbling under the feet of his own people, so that if they are not getting the point, they might do so.

There are lots of difficult questions in the passage today.

But the question for you to be considering as we walk through the end of Romans 9 is whether or not you truly get that you are a vessel of God's mercy. Because, either you are increasingly becoming more and more reliant upon God's sovereign mercy, or you are even now tripping over the stumbling stone that God has laid.

Let's follow Paul's reasoning, beginning in verse 24. Notice that verse 24 is midway through Paul's thought.

I will paraphrase what Paul has just said in verse 23.

God is making known the riches of his glory to his vessels of mercy...

²⁴ even us whom he has called,
not from the Jews only
but
also from the Gentiles?

The vessels of God's mercy have been "called" by God's Sovereign Grace. Just to repeat what we have said in previous sermons, this call is the supernatural call of God, which accompanies the outward call of the gospel, and which always results in spiritual life being born into the heart of those dead in their sin.

Jesus' calling Lazarus out of the tomb, after he had been dead for four days, illustrates the power of God's call and its ability to give life. As a fruit of God's call, we respond to God by turning from our sin and believing in Jesus Christ. What amazes Paul here is that God IS sovereignly calling people, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles!

God's sovereign grace is not limited to those who are within the visible church of Israel. He is calling to himself those who were outside of his visible people, meaning the Gentiles. (Illustration of a bowl of water: God is calling people to himself who are not in the bowl.) It is also very important to see that God only has ONE people. He calls them from both inside and outside the bowl, but they are called to be one people, not two.

This is implied in Paul's use of "us". He is a Jew who has been called. And many of the Roman Christians are Gentiles, but they are one people. It does not matter if you have been called from the Jewish people or have been called as a Gentile, it is God's sovereign mercy alone that has called you. As usual, Paul supports God's call of Gentiles to himself from OT Scripture. The OT anticipates that God would call to himself those outside of the bowl.

He makes reference to Hosea 1:10 and 2:23.

25 As indeed he says in Hosea,
 "Those who were not my people
 I will call 'my people,'
 and
her who was not beloved
 I will call 'beloved.'"
26 "And
in the very place where it was said to them,
 'You are not my people,'

there they will be called
'sons of the living God.'"

If you were inside the bowl, you were "God's people". You were "Beloved of God." But if you were outside the bowl, you were "Not God's people" and you were "not beloved."

If you understand the context of the book of Hosea, you know that it is not precisely talking about Gentiles. Paul knows this to be the case. But he also knows that if the shoe fits, wear it.

In the context of Hosea, it is the Northern Kingdom of Israel that God declares to be "not my people" and "unloved" or no mercy. Israel had split into two kingdoms after the reign of King Solomon. The Northern Kingdom consisted of 10 Tribes while the Southern Kingdom consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. They were then scattered throughout the Assyrian empire and those that remained in the Land were mixed with Assyrians such that the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah despised them even worse than Gentiles. This is the beginning of the hated Samaritans in Jesus' day.

So, God's promise in Hosea is really that God would call to himself those belonging to the scattered Northern Kingdom. God is saying to those who were once "his people" and "beloved of God" that they are no longer "his people" and no longer "beloved".

But Paul rightly understands that the phrases "not my people" and "not loved" also may apply to Gentiles. In fact, that is really the point.

In casting off the Northern Kingdom, God equalizes his people with the Gentiles! How humiliating for his chosen people! God does this because of the sin of the Northern Kingdom. It is humiliating that God would cast off his own people and call them "not my people." But, the glorious good news is that at the very time that God declares to his rebellious people that they are no longer his people, He also declares that He will also call "not my people" "my people".

Confusing right? God calls a people to himself. He tells them that they have a right to think of themselves as his people, his beloved. Then, because of their

stubborn love of sin, and their pride, he cuts them off. He calls them “not my people” and “not beloved.” These are the same hated names that they would have placed upon the Gentiles. And then, God says that He is able to call those who are “not my people” my people, and those who are “not beloved” beloved. And when God does this very thing, those who have been called will “KNOW” that they have been called by Sovereign mercy alone.

So, when God saves these people they will know that they have been chosen not for anything in themselves, but only on the basis of sovereign mercy. What was true for the Israelites of old, is equally true for us today in the Church.

Whether you are in the Church, or have been cast out of the church, or have never been in the Church, you are called Sons of the living God because of Sovereign grace alone. The person who has grown up in the Church and walked with God their entire life MUST learn that they are saved by God’s sovereign mercy alone. The person who grew up in the Church, but then walked away from Christ is entirely a product of God’s sovereign mercy when He brings them back into the faith. The person who has never set foot in the Church until they hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, is saved entirely of mercy.

No person is ever saved by anything in themselves: no heritage, no religious act, no goodness of any kind. Grace alone has always been, and will always be, the foundation of redemption. God is so intent on all his people knowing this, that he is willing for them to fall flat on their face in order to learn it.

Turn to Romans 11:32 and you will see that this is what Paul says at the end of this long discussion about Israel.

Romans 11:32 ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

Consigned = imprisoned, bound, shut up

Your grasping in your heart and mind that you are saved by Sovereign mercy alone is so important to God that He is willing for his own people to experience slavery to disobedience. He does not want any of his children thinking that their own goodness has been the cause of their salvation.

Ephesians 2:8-9 ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Big picture point: God loves to have mercy upon those that he has previously call “no mercy.” That should be good news to us all. But before we can get to the wonder of mercy, we often have to fall flat on our face.

And so, God will often cut out of his own people those who are not living by faith. Why would he cut you off from his own people? Well, one reason is because you continue to cling to your sin. This was what happened to the younger prodigal son. But another reason is that you continue to cling to your own supposed goodness. This was what happened to the older brother of the prodigal.

Paul takes us to the prophet Isaiah, chapter 10, verses 21-23.

²⁷ And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

 "Though the number of the sons of Israel be
 as the sand of the sea,

 only a remnant of them will be saved,

²⁸ for the Lord will carry out his sentence
 upon the earth
 fully and without delay."

Who is Isaiah prophesying about here?

Israel – at the time, the visible people of God.

Isaiah’s lessons:

1. The visible Israel may be numerous, but God is going to judge his own people such that only a remnant of his people will actually be saved.
2. God’s judgment of Israel will be full and swift.

Isaiah 10:21-23 ²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²² For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea,

only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. ²³ For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth.

Isaiah is prophesying the destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. At that time Babylon carried many in Judah back to Babylon. The Temple was desecrated and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Isaiah prophesied of a return to the Land, but only a remnant of those who went out would return.

This small remnant demonstrated that God was not required to save everyone in the bowl. He could choose a smaller remnant to be truly saved. The Exile proved that God could and would judge even his own people. The Exile foreshadows God's Judgment of Israel in 70 AD by the Romans.

But even 70 AD is not the end for Israel. It is a warning that unless things change, a Final Judgment is coming. God can and does judge his own people. The return of a Remnant proved that God could also redeem a portion of those who had been previously judged. And those whom he redeemed would now rest upon the LORD in his mercy for their salvation.

In this sense, the Judgment of Israel is not like God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. When God judged Sodom and Gomorrah they were completely and finally destroyed. As cities, and as the people dwelling in them, God's final judgment had come. There was nothing left. But while God could and would judge his people Israel, he would not do to them what he did to Sodom and Gomorrah. Paul sees this in Isaiah 1:29.

²⁹ And as Isaiah predicted,
"If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah."

Israel, even as an unbelieving people, remains a people simply because God wants her to remain.

The existence, not just of the Jewish State of Israel, but more importantly, of Israel as a religious people, is only because God did not treat them like Sodom

and Gomorrah. This is a good time to remember the larger picture of Romans 9-11. Paul is trying to understand why his fellow Jews are rejecting their Messiah, while so many Gentiles are believing in Jesus. At the most basic level, the answer lies in God's Sovereign Election.

But at another level, God wants Israel to learn that Salvation is only of Grace. The Gentiles were being called totally of grace. They were "not my people" and God was calling them "sons of the living God." In calling Gentiles, God is teaching his people a lesson: you too must be called of grace!

This brings us back to the Stone of Stumbling. If salvation is all of grace, then it is not based upon anything that you do. And if it is all of grace, then it is only received by faith alone. If you have been in the Church for any time at all, you will know that Jesus Christ is the Rock upon which salvation rests.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 28:16** therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid¹ as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'

Paul believes in Jesus as this Rock. But many of his fellow Jews have rejected Jesus. Why have they done this? One answer, that we dealt with last week, is that they have not been given mercy. But another answer that is equally true is that they stumbled over the stone. It would be easy to think that the Jews rejected Jesus simply because they were not convinced that he was the Messiah. Not so, says Paul. There was something about Jesus that was offensive to many Jews. What was it?

Jesus declared to them that their righteousness was not enough, that it would never be enough. The Pharisees embodied the highest form of Jewish religious devotion. Jesus comes along and teaches explicitly that if anyone wanted to be redeemed that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. The Jews had come to believe that their redemption rested in themselves. Maybe they thought that they were saved because of their great heritage of being Children of Abraham.

Maybe they thought that because they possessed the Law of Moses that they were ready for heaven. Maybe they thought that by faithfully applying the covenant sign of circumcision and by keeping many of the ceremonial laws that they would be eternally saved. Maybe they even thought that by doing “good works” as they lived their daily lives they would be redeemed.

Against all of these, Jesus simply says, “It is not enough. You may think you are pursuing righteousness, but you have not attained righteousness. And so, you remain lost.” They are people who are “in the bowl” but Jesus is telling them that they are just as lost as those “outside the bowl.”

If someone has NOT been pursuing righteousness and they are told that they must believe in Jesus who has died for their sins, they have no obstacle in front of them before they can believe. But if someone has been diligently pursuing a life of righteousness and they are told the same thing, they have an obstacle in front of them. It is an obstacle of the worst kind. It is the obstacle of pride.

Jesus is the Stone of Stumbling. But he is only a Stone of Stumbling because of the pride that lives in the hearts of men. And there is no greater pride than religious pride.

There is so much open ungodliness in the world, that when someone chooses to be religious, it is easy to be filled with pride. This was the attitude of many Jews in Paul’s day. And it can also be the attitude of many who go regularly to church in our own day. So many no longer care about religion at all. If you do care about religion, you set yourself apart.

But being religious does not make you righteous. And if you want righteousness, you must consider your religion to be rubbish. That does not mean that you quit being religious altogether. But it does mean that you consider it to be nothing compared to the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:7-9 ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may

gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith –

Now we are ready to read the final verses of Romans 9.

ESV **Romans 9:30**

What shall we say, then?

That Gentiles

who did not pursue righteousness

have attained it,

that is, a righteousness

that is by faith;

31

but

that Israel

who pursued a law

that would lead to righteousness

did not succeed in reaching that law.

32

Why?

Because they did not pursue it by faith,

but

as if it were based on works.

33

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."

God knows the hearts of men. He knows how full of pride we are.

We take something about ourselves that we consider to be of value, and we use it to feel good about ourselves.

I pride myself in hard work. Whatever I lack in other areas, I convince myself that I make up for it in sweat equity. Working hard is a good thing. I believe God wants us to work hard. His Spirit even enables us to work hard. But, my work ethic can become a source of pride which God abhors.

Maybe it is not your work ethic that fills you with pride. Maybe it is something else: good theology, intelligence, biblical scholarship, kindness, experiencing the gifts of the Spirit, having a heart for evangelism.

We all have something in which we take pride. Into this attitude God sends the Stone of Stumbling, the Rock of Offense. You mean that nothing that I have done merits my entrance into heaven?! That is exactly what the Stone of Stumbling says to you. Either you rely upon your own goodness, or you rely entirely upon the Rock of Offense. Literally the Rock of Scandal.

The most religious and the most wicked enter into glory only through faith in the Stone who is alone righteous. Are you OK with that? Because if you are not, you are stumbling on the Stone, even though you are living in the bowl of the Church. And if you don't give up your pride, and seek the righteousness that is by faith alone, you will become like the unbelieving Jews, who are cut off from God's salvation.

That is the Gospel Truth. The good news is there in verse 33. If you give up on your own righteousness and cast yourself on the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone, you will never be put to shame.

whoever believes in him
will not be put to shame."

Whoever believes in the Stone of Stumbling will not be put to shame. It is very scary to put all your hope in Jesus Christ. We think it is safer to trust in ourselves. God understands this. So, he tells his people repeatedly, "If you trust in the LORD, the Stone, you will not be put to shame."

To be put to shame is to be humiliated. To be shown to be foolish.

God says, "Trust in Jesus and when the Day of Final Judgment arrives the righteousness of the Stone will be proven to be enough."

Casting away your own righteousness, however you calculate it, and clinging to the righteousness of Jesus Christ is the defining quality of those who have received mercy.

What defines you? Are you pursuing your own righteousness? The stone of stumbling says to you, "It is not enough." You have not attained righteousness. Cast aside your own pitiful goodness. And rely upon me. I am true righteousness. And I have paid the price of your unrighteousness at the cross. Trust in me. You will never be put to shame. You will not be humiliated.

God says to you: I put the rock in front of you so that you would stumble, but in the hopes that after falling, you would understand that the very one you stumbled over is the Rock of your Salvation. All of God's saints must learn this. King David had to learn it in his sin with Bathsheba. Moses had to learn it in his anger in striking the rock. Peter had to learn it in his denial of Jesus.

What is the stone of stumbling? It is God's declaring to you that all of your supposed goodness is not enough. It is God cutting into your pride. How does the Stone of Stumbling become the Rock of Salvation?

By your relying only and entirely on the righteousness of Jesus Christ for your redemption. Most of us here today would say the words that you are trusting in Christ alone. But are you noticing the attitudes of pride that fill you heart? Do you inwardly feel superior to others who are less diligent than you? Do you really consider that all of your goodness, all that is best about you, is rubbish to be thrown on a garbage dump?

If you continue to cling to your own goodness, do not be surprised when God places the stone of stumbling in front of you. It is in his love that he allows you to fall.

Good members of Faith Church. None of your goodness will ever be enough. Cast yourself entirely upon Jesus Christ. Receive his true righteousness by faith alone.

And you will never be put to shame.

Amen.