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The Christian faith is the good news that God built a cross-shaped bridge TO US in the sending of His Son. This is the “righteousness that comes from God.”



“AND THE WINNER IS...”

THE ULTIMATE COMPETITION

The audience leans forward in anticipation as the envelope is opened. “And the winner is...!” It’s the moment at the Academy Awards when the “Oscar” is presented for Best Picture. For many people, the heart of life is competition that yields a winner. It may be the “Best Dog in Show” at the Westminster Kennel Club. It may be a big payoff in the lottery. It may be the Super Bowl trophy or a medal at the Olympic Games. Competition isn’t just for trophies. Its target may be a high-paying government contract or the response of a beautiful woman. It may bring money, honor, or simply bragging rights. “Winning isn’t everything — it’s the only thing!” is one of the cardinal doctrines of the American sports credo.

There’s a more serious brand of competition in the spiritual realm. The apostle Paul summarized the goal of the religious enterprise as attaining a prize called righteousness. He wasn’t averse to using athletic imagery (as in 1 Cor. 9:24–27) such as running or boxing when he spoke of that quest. As he pondered the mystery of the Jews and their response to the Gospel message, Paul spoke of a competition, not between two ethnic groups (Jews and Gentiles) but between two dramatically different ideas, two opposing avenues for attaining righteousness. A righteousness sought by fulfilling the demands of the Law leads to a very different end than the righteousness that is received by faith in Christ.



Romans 10 divides into two sections detailing each of these approaches in turn. It's the ultimate competition. Paul makes clear which one is the "winner."

THE RUNNERS STUMBLER ON A STONE *ROMANS 9:30–33*

As if looking back from the finish line at a race just ended, Paul describes a great irony: "Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it... Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not" (vv. 30–31). In the movie *Amadeus*, a refined and proper composer (Antonio Salieri) who aspires to be "God's musician" impresses no one. Meanwhile, a wild profligate who is lewd and crude (Mozart) writes unforgettable music. How can this utter barbarian, says Salieri, be so obviously gifted with musical genius and loved by God (the very meaning of "Amadeus"!)? Doesn't God have it backwards?

That's what the Jews thought. They prided themselves on being God's own people and despised those "barbarian" Gentiles. Yet they wound up losers, while the Gentiles were winners who got the righteousness the Jews had sought. Why? "They did not pursue it by faith," explains Paul, "but as if it were based on works" (v. 32). Like a runner in a race who suddenly stumbles and falls, the Jews have stumbled over something Paul calls "the stumbling stone" (v. 32).

The image of a stone or large rock is frequent in the Old Testament. Moses struck a rock with his rod and it gushed water for the thirsty people (Num. 20:7–11). An ominous stone shattered the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2:34–35). God Himself is called a "rock" (Ps. 18:2 and often elsewhere). Here in verse 33, Paul cites portions of Is. 28:16 ("I am laying in Zion a stone") and Is. 8:14 ("a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense"). According to Isaiah 28, God's original intent for that stone was that it serve as a foundation, a place to stand securely in the Kingdom of God. In Isaiah 8, God Himself is that solid "stone," and the prophet is urged to trust God and not walk in "the [evil] way of this people" (Is. 8:11). God Himself will become,

the passage continues, a "stone of offense" that will make the residents of Judah stumble. The stone is an image of both hope and judgment, depending on the response people make.

Paul has rather freely appropriated the texts in Isaiah to refer to Jesus Christ as the "stumbling stone." Paul ends verse 33 with another, borrowing from Isaiah (49:23) that "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." There is no doubt that Paul identifies "him" as Jesus, who applied the stone imagery to Himself in Luke 20:17–18. Paul says it all again in 1 Cor. 10:4, where he says flatly, "the Rock was Christ." In the "faith versus works" competition, Jesus the great Rock provides a foundation of righteousness for any (Jew or Gentile!) that will trust Him, but will be the cause of stumbling for any who choose to pursue righteousness by their works. That, simply, is what Paul sees happening to the Jews who have rejected the Gospel!

THE JEWS' MISPLACED ZEAL *ROMANS 10:1–5*

In 10:1 Paul returns to the theme first announced in Chapter 9 about his anguish over the Jews. He is praying for them "that they may be saved." Consciously or not, Paul is following in the footsteps of Moses, who prayed for Israel to be spared (Ex. 32:11–14) and Samuel, who prayed for their deliverance from the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:7–9).

The Jews, Paul admits, "have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (v. 2). As a former Pharisee, Paul knew something about zeal! The Pharisees had their origin in the Maccabean Revolt, which had begun with the famous summons of Mattathias: "Let everyone who is zealous for the Law and who upholds the covenant come out after me!" (1 Macc. 2:27–28). Paul's own zealotry had led him to persecute the followers of Jesus until, through the special revelation on the Damascus road, he realized that his zealotry was misguided. He knew by bitter experience that sincerity in religion isn't enough. One might be sincerely wrong!

Sincere the Jews surely were, but their zeal led them down a dead end. Their mistake, Paul says, was that they were “seeking to establish their own” righteousness (v. 3) instead of the righteousness God offered them in Christ Jesus.

That, in summary, is the difference between the Christian faith and all others. How does Christianity “work”? Other religions attempt to bridge the gap between us and God by human striving. The Christian faith is the good news that God built a cross-shaped bridge TO US in the sending of His Son. This is the “righteousness that comes from God.” Paul wanted for the Jews what he had found: “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:9). That’s what he preached. That’s what he now prays for them.

Those who discover the gift of grace in Christ find that He is “the end of the law...to everyone who believes” (v. 4). Paul does not mean to say the Law plays no more role in the Christian life. Jesus Himself had said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law” (Matt. 5:17). What comes to an “end” is the condemnation the Law speaks when its demands are not kept, since Christ fulfilled them all for us! His obedience, His righteousness becomes ours when we trust in Him. The true “end” (purpose) of the Law is to bring us to Christ. “It was to faith in Christ that the Law was all along leading” (Cranfield).

Paul has explained the futility of “righteousness through the Law.” Now he turns to elaborate on the other route — the divinely provided route by which God’s righteousness comes to us through Christ. This is the winner in the competition.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS BASED ON FAITH

ROMANS 10:6–15

In a masterful way, Paul once more uses the Old Testament to proclaim the good news of Christ. He builds on a quotation from Deuteronomy 30:11–14, the intent of which was to prevent the Israelites from evading their spiritual responsibilities by pleading ignorance of God’s Word and will. Jews might plead that knowing and doing God’s will is TOO HARD! Like ascending into heaven (who can do that, after all?) or descending to the realm of the dead (who can do that and live to tell the tale?). No, says Moses. God brought the commandments near (on Mt. Sinai) and made it all possible for you. With similar intent, Paul cites portions of the passage (ordinary type), inserting what Jesus has done for us (bold type), in this fashion:

“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)**” (vv. 6–8).

Once again, God’s mighty acts have brought His Word near to humanity. No need to do the impossible by “ascending” to heaven, for God brought His Son down to earth in His incarnation! No need to visit the realm of the dead, for God raised Jesus bodily and brought Him back to us! Christmas and Easter in Pauline fashion. “What was impossible for us is precisely what Jesus has done” (Middendorf).

This wondrous message is now, as Moses says, “in your mouth and in your heart.” You are

hearing that very Word from me, Paul says. Right here! He then takes that “mouth and heart” language and compresses the Gospel message into a single beautiful verse: “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” (v. 9). So stunningly simple (and even shorter than John 3:16), this passage is routinely displayed on placards by fans in the end zone at pro football games. It’s aimed straight at the TV audience. The placard makers are saying, “Look it up, you couch potatoes! Romans 10:9. Go get your Bible and check it out.” It’s for Jews, Gentiles, everybody, Paul makes clear.

How does that Gospel word “come near” to people? How will they know to “call on the name of the Lord” (v. 13)? God does not, as one pastor liked to say, “jump on people in dark alleys”! Instead, God has arranged what Lutherans call the “means of grace” as a pipeline for His Word. Here preaching is the pipeline in view. In a sequence of rhetorical questions, Paul shows the necessity of such Gospel proclamation through the preached Word:

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? ...

How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? ...

How are they to hear without someone preaching? ...

How are they to preach unless they are sent?”
(vv. 14–15)

Those who hear the call and undertake to run here and there and everywhere preaching that message have “beautiful feet” (Is. 52:7) indeed! Who had the “beautiful feet” in your life? Who brought you the message of Christ? A parent, a neighbor, a pastor, a friend? Give thanks to God. Then use your feet the same beautiful way.

ISRAEL’S RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

ROMANS 10:16–21

By works or by faith? The two competing avenues to righteousness are before us. God has sent His redeeming Word incarnate in His Son. How will people

respond? Paul returns to his original anguish (9:2) over the response, or lack of it, by the Jews. The ESV says, “they have not all obeyed the gospel” (v. 16). “Obeyed,” however, is a misleading translation of a Greek word that more likely means “listened responsively” (Middendorf). “Obeyed” makes it seem that salvation, in the end, is contingent on obedience rather than faith. The problem is that they did not “listen responsively” and believe what they heard. The very next verse underlines it by saying that “faith comes from hearing” (v. 17).

Once again Paul’s anguished question: why have many Jews refused to believe? Is it possible that they “have not heard” the message? Not at all, answers Paul, once again with an Old Testament quote. The fault does not lie with God! “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world” (v. 18, quoting Ps. 19:4). Or is it possible that they “did not understand”? Not at all! The issue was not a failure to understand, but a willfully “disobedient and contrary” people (v. 21, quoting Is. 65:2). It has been so for centuries!

In response to that rejection, God has embarked on a surprising strategy. He will deliberately court the Gentiles. “I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (v. 20, quoting Is. 65:1). Further, He wants to provoke the Jews to jealousy! “I will make them jealous with those who are [not a nation]” (Deut. 32:21). In the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the great-hearted father throws a banquet for the returned prodigal, hoping perhaps to provoke the older, disapproving brother to an envy over missing a party from which he had excluded himself. Will that brother come in? Will the Jews, who are now on the outside looking in, come back to the Father who still “holds out His hands” to them (v. 21)?

God has not written off Israel. He has not destined them for damnation. Instead, His hands are still spread out, a gesture of appeal and welcome. God still invites. What will happen next? In the next chapter, Paul will paint a hopeful picture of what may still come in God’s mysterious plan for His people.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 11:1-36

Lord God, You have planted a great tree and grafted me in as a branch. Nourish me again by Your Word, that I may know the depth of Your riches and wisdom in this wondrous epistle. Keep me faithful. Make me fruitful. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

For review:

1. Summarize the “two ways” to righteousness that Paul contrasts.

2. List the “stone” references touched on in the lesson. Add to it any other “stone stories” you can recall, along with any hymns that speak of God as a Rock.

3. Mention any “discoveries” you made in this lesson.

Romans 11:1-10

4. As evidence that God has not rejected Israel, Paul points to Elijah's experience in 1 Kings 19:1-18. Read that story. What does Elijah learn?

5. Have you ever felt like Elijah did? How did God address your concerns?

6. A key word in verse 5 is “remnant.” What do you learn about this idea in Is. 10:19-22; Jer. 23:3; and Micah 4:7?

7. According to v. 8, how does God respond to Israel's stubborn refusal to trust and obey Him?

Romans 11:11-24

8. What is a good consequence of Israel's “trespass”?

9. Where does Paul get the illustration of the dough (check footnote or cross-references)?

10. Another illustration is the olive tree. See Jer. 11:16. Who are the Natural branches?

Grafted branches?

11. According to vv. 17–22, what reaction is Paul trying to prevent among the Gentiles?

12. What's hopeful about verse 23?

Romans 11:25–32

13. Paul speaks of “all Israel” being saved in v. 26. Some anticipate a mass conversion of Jews at the end of history. How is this anticipation tempered in v. 14?

in v. 23?

14. Paul speaks of a “partial” hardening of Israel (v. 25). What's God's purpose in this?

15. Based on this section, who constitutes “all Israel”?

16. Does Paul's summary of God's interaction with humanity in v. 32 make you feel resigned or hopeful?

Romans 11:33–36

17. Why do you suppose Paul adds this doxology (word/song of praise)?

What does it say about God?

About us?

18. How have Chapters 9–11 deepened your understanding of God's “mysterious ways”?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 11

Rom. 11:33 *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*