



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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By Faith

Romans 9:30-10:4

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Imagine living in Jerusalem in the early part of the seventh century before Jesus. Your country, Judah, along with all the other smaller countries surrounding it, have been living for decades with the threat of invasion by the armies of the Assyrian Empire. Invasion is a scary prospect. War is always an ugly thing, destroying lands and peoples and their livelihoods. But you know that invasion by Assyria will mean more than that. Assyria has a sort of scorched earth policy, but even worse, you know that the way Assyria has found to consolidate conquered lands into the empire is to uproot the people it conquers and to resettle them somewhere else in the empire. If the Assyrians conquer Judah, the people of Judah will be marched off to live in some other land, while strangers come to live in Judah. People in the ancient world worshipped gods associated with their lands and cities. This was the Assyrian way to assert the power of the their gods over the gods of conquered peoples so that they could be assimilated. For the people of Judah, it would raise the question: Has the Lord, the God of Israel failed? Has he been conquered by the Assyrian gods?

The trauma of this threat of invasion was written into the Jewish consciousness just as dramatically as the exile itself was. When Paul, in First Corinthians, warns against using the gift of tongues without interpretation, he draws on the angst of the siege of Jerusalem. Everyone knew that the fall of the city was imminent and they knew it because, as they hunkered down behind the city walls, they could hear the Assyrians soldiers, shouting and taunting them in a language they couldn't understand. Paul speaks of unintelligible languages as a sign of coming judgement. You see, it wasn't

just the fear of a foreign army, of conquest, or even of exile and death. The Assyrian army, camped outside the walls, was the means of God's judgement on his people. And that made the siege all the more frightening. God had spoken through Isaiah, warning the people over and over and over to return to him. Rather than trust in him, they had trusted in horses and chariots. Rather than trusting in him, they had forged an alliance with the pagan Egyptians. Even when they did show some kind of trust in him, praying and offering sacrifices in the temple, they hedged their bets and offered sacrifices and prayers to pagan gods as well. And so, through the prophet, the Lord had spoken: Your conquest and your exile do not mean that I've abandoned you. Just the opposite, in fact. The Assyrians are my means of judgement. Your conquest and exile mean that I have *not* failed or forgotten you, but am disciplining you for your lack of covenant obedience.

It's bad enough to think that your downfall has happened because your god has failed. Far more frightening is the prospect that your downfall has been orchestrated by your god as a means of discipline. The Lord spoke through Isaiah using the words that Paul roughly quotes in Romans 9:33:

Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation stone in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not panic.' (Isaiah 28:16)

There was deliverance. As Paul has been saying, a remnant would come through the other side of judgement. But many would not. Paul also quotes another passage from Isaiah:

But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling...a trap and a snare to the inhabitant of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken. (Isaiah 8:14)

The Lord's call to faith in him means salvation for those who believe, but that same call to faith becomes a stumbling block causing many to trip into judgment. Either way, the Lord is at work to fulfil his promises and to bring about his purposes.

That's where we left Paul last week. He's been telling Israel's story in a way that stresses the faithfulness or covenant righteousness of God. Israel's failure to believe in the Messiah is not a sign that God has failed—it's just the opposite, in fact. What happened eight hundred years before, back in Isaiah's day, has happened again, this time with Jesus. Once again, Israel is stumbling obviously into judgement, with only a small remnant to escape, but Paul explains, this has been God's means of calling "vessels of glory" and creating a new Israel, a new family for Abraham, made up not only of Jews, but also of Gentiles. Look at Romans 9, beginning at verse 30:

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.

Shall we say that the Gentiles who never cared about righteousness have now got it, while the Jews who were zealous for the law, thinking it was the way to righteousness, have missed out? Yes. That's exactly what Paul is saying. But first, we need to clarify what he means by "righteousness". Righteousness is the status, given or declared by the judge, that a person is in the right. In the covenant status of Paul's history of salvation, to be "righteous" means to be part of God's covenant family or covenant people. To be righteous is to be the seed or the offspring of Abraham.

At the end of the last section Paul quoted Isaiah and Hosea. The people who were not "my people", would become "my people". The people who were "not beloved" would be called "beloved". The Lord would save a remnant—both Jews and Gentiles—otherwise Abraham's family would end up like the people of Sodom and

Gomorra—wiped out, none left. And now there's this question of the status of Gentiles (non-Jews) in the covenant family, but the even bigger question is: What about the Jews? What happened?

Paul's point is that covenant membership—this status of “righteousness”—depends on *faith* and always has. Israel was eager for the *torah*—the law—and that should have been a good thing, but as Paul wrote back in 7:21-25, the reality of it was that the harder Israel grabbed hold of the law, the more she found evil was at hand. That was not the way to righteousness or to membership in the covenant family. **“Why?”** Paul asks in verse 32:

Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.

Israel stove after the law, but she never attained it. Why? Because she went after it as if it was about works when it was really about faith. And here's something important to keep in mind: Paul's not saying the law was bad or wrong or second-best, just waiting for Jesus to come along and replace it with faith. That's often how've been taught to think about the law. We've often been taught to think of the law as “works” which was the “old way”, but that Jesus has replaced it with something better called faith. But Paul says, “No”. Faith has actually been the key and the whole point all along. The law is God's law. It's good. Even covenant membership *is* marked out by our attaining to it—and I say “our”, not “their”, because Paul includes Jews and Gentiles alike here. The issue, however, is what attaining to the law means. Paul will get to that in later in 10:6-9, which we'll look at next week, but Paul has already hinted at this several times in 2:25-29, 3:27-31, and especially 8:4-8 and that's that there is a way for both Jews and Gentiles to keep the law. This way of keeping the law is what the law was pointing and working towards all along, and it's what Jesus and his gift of the Spirit have finally made possible. We see this in the Spirit's fulfilment of the prophets' promise that God would one day pour out his Spirit to turn hearts

of stone into hearts of flesh, bringing to an end their idolatry and, instead, causing them to overflow with love for God.

You see, Israel's problem was that she saw “works of the law”—summed up particularly in those things that set the Jews apart: circumcision, diet, and Sabbath—Israel saw these works of the law as the fulfilment of the law and saw them as *the* defining characteristics of God's people. In just a bit, Paul will speak of Jesus as the “end” of the law, but in contrast to that, the Jews saw maintaining their ethnic identity apart from the Gentiles as the “end” of the law. And Paul here speaks a resounding “No!” The God who gave Israel this law is the same God who promised Abraham a worldwide family. So, the law was good, but it was headed in the direction of inclusivity while Israel tried to use the law as a means of excluding the nations. Instead of pursuing the law by faith—and Paul doesn't elaborate on that at this point—Israel co-opted the law for her own agenda. The result, as Paul says in the second half of verse 32, is that:

They have stumbled over the stumbling stone...

Israel did this back in Isaiah's day and she has done it again with Jesus. She ran after the law, but ended up tripping over it. And, Paul stresses here, it was God himself who—believe it or not—in his faithfulness put the stumbling block there for a good reason. This is where he quotes Isaiah. In those days, the Lord's call to faith became a stumbling block that led to judgement and that judgement to the saving of a remnant, so now the same thing is happening again. In Isaiah, the stumbling block was God himself and here Paul tweaks the wording ever so slightly, pointing this time to Jesus himself as the one who is both the sanctuary and the stumbling block. Paul, no doubt, quotes Isaiah here because this is the same image that Jesus used of himself. The old temple was to be destroyed in a great act of judgement on unbelieving Israel, but in his death and resurrection he would build another. Jesus is now the place

where human beings meet the living God. More importantly, in terms of Paul's talk about fulfilling the law, those who are in Christ, are themselves the temple, filled with God's own Spirit. And, of course, the Jews, who saw the law and the temple as signs of an exclusive identity called for Jesus to be crucified for saying these things. In Jesus, God laid the cornerstone of a new and better temple, but Israel stumbled over it...right into judgement and destruction.

Now, why would God do such a thing? This is what Paul's been working to explain for the last chapter: God intended from the beginning that Israel would be the Messiah's people according to flesh and that just like the Messiah, Israel would be cast away so that the nations would be saved. Israel has stumbled over the stone that God himself laid in Zion so that the Gentiles would find in it a sanctuary. Again, Paul is explaining that God is faithful. God's word has not failed.

But let's keep going for a few more verses into Chapter 10. Paul stressed at the beginning of Chapter 9 that the lost state of his people caused him anguish and sorrow, but with all he's written since then, we might be tempted to write Israel off. Paul makes sure that doesn't happen. Look at 10:1.

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

Paul wants the Gentiles in Rome to share in his desire to see his people saved. He goes on in verse 2, stressing the dire situation of his people:

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

Paul understood this as well as anyone, because what he's describing here is himself before he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus. He had a zeal for the law and he had a zeal for God. He had so much zeal for God that he took it on as his duty to hunt down Christian and to violently oppose them.

Think of Stephen, stoned by zealous Jews while Paul held their coats. He went looking for Christians and dragged them back to be judged and condemned by the Sanhedrin. And yet, all of that zeal was misplaced. Why? Because, he writes, they lack knowledge—they've failed to understand the true purposes of God and the true end of the law he gave. What's the knowledge they lack? How have the misunderstood this whole venture of covenant and redemption? We'll finish with verses 3 and 4:

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.

What does Paul mean? We'll go through it step by step. First, as he just wrote, they are zealous for God, but they lack knowledge. This is what they lack: they are ignorant of God's righteousness. And what is God's righteousness? Well, this is what Paul's been explaining through his letter so far and particularly and in detail in Chapter 9. God's righteousness is his covenant faithfulness. God's righteousness is his faithfulness to the promises he made to Abraham. God has done what he said he would do and the evidence is this sweeping story from Abraham to Jesus the Messiah. And Israel's problem is that she has failed to recognise what God had been doing all this time and she has failed to recognise the Messiah-shaped fulfilment of his promises. Again, think of Paul. He was zealous for God and for God's law, but he refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. When he met the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, it forced him to rethink everything he knew—essentially to rethink the history of his people, now centred around and always pointing towards Jesus.

Paul's problem with Israel isn't that they pursued a works-righteousness, trying to earn salvation. That idea has been put to rest by what we've learned, particularly over the last century, as we've learned more about Judaism in that period. No,

the result of this ignorance is that Israel has been the wicked tenants of Jesus' parable. Every time the Lord came to them to set them straight, they rejected him. They killed his prophets and they finally killed the Messiah he sent. They rejected the Lord's agenda. They tried to take his inheritance for themselves and themselves alone. Just as God, in his righteousness, was creating a family defined by its faith and that would welcome in the nations, the Jews were claiming God's promises to Abraham as their exclusive possession to the exclusion of the Gentiles. There is not and never was anything wrong with the law that set Israel apart. There is not and never was anything wrong with circumcision or diet or Sabbath. But what Paul's been getting at is that these are not and never were the badges of covenant membership. Faith in the righteousness of God, now made known in the crucified and risen Jesus, is the badge of membership in the covenant family.

This is what Paul's saying in verse four: For Christ is the end of the law. Remember, Christ isn't Jesus' last name. Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. And when Paul is talking about the "end of the law", he's not talking about the law—*torah*—coming to an end to be replaced by something else in the way many people think: law and works being replaced by grace and faith. Paul uses the Greek word *telos* and its sense here is that of "goal"—the place or the end *to which the law was heading*.

You see, the Jews thought that *torah* was the end itself, but Paul is saying that the *torah* was just the beginning—a pointer to the Messiah, to Jesus, who would come to renew the broken covenant, making it possible for God's people, for Abraham's seed, to fulfil the *torah*. And what the unbelieving Jews just couldn't wrap their heads around was that the fulfilment of *torah*, in the end wasn't about external markers like circumcision, but the inward marks of the Spirit—idoltrous hearts of stone turned into hearts of flesh filled with love for God.

The *torah* has served its purpose. In that sense, as much as Jesus is the goal of the law, he is also the end, but only because he's brought it to the point of fulfilment. But this isn't the sort of end that comes to your holiday when the car breaks down half-way there. It's the end of the journey when the car has brought you to your holiday destination. Or think in terms of writing. You might stop writing because you're interrupted by the telephone, but that's not the same thing as when you stop writing because you've finally finished the book you've been working on for years.¹ That's the idea Paul's getting at when he writes about Jesus the Messiah as the end of the law. He has brought God's saving plan to fulfilment and his people are now defined—they are now declared to be his people and to be in the right—on the basis of their faith in Jesus as Creation's saving King.

Now, Paul isn't finished with this line of thought. He'll carry it through Chapter 11, but I we're far enough into it so see the importance of what Paul's doing here. He's showing the people in Rome to whom he wrote where they were in this big story of God and Israel in the nations. In doing that, Paul helps us to get our bearings in the story as well. And I think this is a good place to stress how important it is for us to understand this narrative that is so much bigger than us. We've forgotten much of it even though it's right under our noses in the Bible.

You see, in the early centuries of the Church, as it became increasingly a Gentile movement and as it was faced with false doctrines and heresies, the Church Fathers hammered out what it means to be a Christian. They established "orthodoxy". And that was, without a doubt, a good thing. But instead of using the language of the Old Testament and the narrative of God and Israel to define things like the Trinity and the Incarnation, they defined these more as abstract doctrines, detached from the big story. The same thing

¹ I am indebted to Tom Wright for these illustrations: *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), page 658.

happened again in the Protestant Reformation as disagreements over the nature of salvation and the relationship of works and grace were hammered out. Our theology was defined, no so much in terms of this story Paul tells, but in terms of abstracted and universal theological ideas and principles.

Things have been complicated further in the last two to three centuries as Christians have struggled to respond to the Enlightenment and the way it has refocused our culture on the individual above all else. The biblical story involves individuals, but it's focus—and this is the very nature of “covenant”—it's focus is on *groups*, on whole peoples, like Israel, like the Church. When there is focus on an individual, it's on Jesus, around whom the big story of these peoples is centred. But we've increasingly focused not on the big story, but on individuals. We see the fruit of this today in the many people out there who think they can be followers of Jesus apart from any meaningful connection with his body, the church. But, also, as we've adapted the Gospel to the self-focused thinking of our day, we've also emphasised the therapeutic aspects of the Gospel, increasingly to the exclusion of what is really its central message: Jesus is Lord. We appeal to people to come to Jesus because he will meet their felt needs, whether it's to forgive and take away their guilt, to deliver them from sickness or anguish, to fix their relationships, or to make them happy. That's not to say that Jesus can't and doesn't do these things. It's not to say that these aren't *part* of the good news, but they're not the centre of it. Jesus forgives, he heals, he makes new, he gives purpose *because* he is the King who is setting the messes of our fallen world to right. Brothers and Sisters, *first and foremost*, we come to Jesus, not looking for what he can give us, but submitting to him in faith as the King. We owe him our faith-filled allegiance regardless of what he has to offer us. The bad fruit of getting the gospel backwards is all around us in churches filled with people looking for solutions to their problems, but with little or no real commitment to Jesus as Lord. I had a conversation this week

with another pastor. I'll talk more about this later at the AGM, but he's been doing pulpit supply around the community and he pointed out that the church here is on the verge of death. Our churches are old and dying. The message we've preached—our unhealthy emphasis on the self and our presentation of Jesus as the solution to felt needs instead of as Creation's Lord who demands our allegiance—it never worked particularly well, but now it's hardly working at all in light of the way our society as again shifted in its thinking. Dear Friends, we need to learn the big story of the Bible again—the story Paul is telling here. It's the story of the King who sought out people who weren't even looking for him—does that sound surprisingly like the people around us today?—he sought out the people who weren't even looking for him. Pagan Greeks and Romans suddenly found themselves embraced by the divine love of Israel's God as a sheer act of grace. It's also the story, as Paul tells us here, of the shock of the people who thought that the story was all about them and could only end with them coming out on top of it all. Instead, their story came to its climax in a Messiah who was unlike the Messiah they anticipated. Instead of setting them free, when the King came, he died their death and then invited them to follow him. To do so was the only way to find the fulfilment of their own story. There are many ways in which this story is replaying itself today, with the Church standing in the place of Israel. Brothers and Sisters, let us not find ourselves stumbling over the cornerstone as Israel. Let us learn the story, let us be reminded how God works. He is the King. He is Creation's true Lord. And he gives salvation to whoever will call on his name, submitting to his righteous rule in faith.

Gracious Father, we who were once “not your people”, have been by grace made “your people”. We who were “not beloved” have now been embraced by your love in Jesus. Keep your grace ever before us, that we might never take it for granted. And let us always remember that you have not sought us out because we were deserving, but

because you are merciful. Remind us that this is how you work. Keep us from presumption and keep us from twisting the gospel into a message that is primarily about us instead of what it is: the good news that Jesus is Lord. Remind us of the message that John and Jesus proclaimed so that we might proclaim it ourselves: repent for the King has come. In the name of the King we pray. Amen.