

“Faith Comes from Hearing”

Sermons on Romans # 27

Texts: Romans 10:14-21; Isaiah 52:1-12

In Romans 1:17, Paul told us that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. He also told us that the gospel went first to the Jew and then to the Gentiles. But now the apostle must answer the difficult questions that Israel’s priority in redemptive history raise. “If the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, why is it that Israel does not believe the gospel and has come under God’s curse?” “Does God not keep his promises?” Or, “Has God changed his purposes for Israel?” “What role will Israel play in the future, if any?” Answering these difficult questions and explaining God’s future purposes for Israel in light of the church’s mission to the Gentiles is theme of this section Romans, chapters 9-11.

As we have pointed out in previous sermons, Romans 9-11 is an integral part of this letter and is not merely Paul’s personal lament over the current unbelief of his own beloved people, the Jews. Yes, Paul speaks about his unceasing anguish for Israel. Yes, he tells us of his desire to spare his people by taking upon himself the covenant curses which have now come upon the Jews. Paul also tells us that it is his heart’s fervent desire that his people, the Jews, will at some point be saved. And so while the material we find in these three chapters is certainly personal, this is not merely a personal lament. These chapters are an explanation of a theological conundrum. *If* the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and *if* through the preaching of the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, why is that Israel finds itself in such a lamentable situation? How do God’s purposes for Israel relate to God’s purposes for the Gentiles? How are Jew and Gentile to understand their roles in the church, now that the long-expected messianic age has dawned. These are very real and pressing questions throughout the churches and Paul must address them at some point in this letter. And this is why Romans 9-11 is such an integral part of this letter.

Preaching through this section of Romans presents a number of difficulties. For one thing, Romans 9-11 is one extended argument. Because of time constraints, we cannot tackle the entire three chapters in one sitting, which is most unfortunate. Splitting this section into several sermons makes it difficult to see the unity of Paul’s argument and obscures the big picture. And so, I want to do a bit of review, lay out the big picture once again, as well as cover some points of application we were but able to skim last time.

To answer the questions being raised in the churches, in Romans 9:6 Paul makes a very important distinction between “all Israel” and “true Israel,” a distinction which is foundational to everything which follows. “All Israel” is the broader group which is composed of all circumcised and ethnic Jews. “True Israel” is a much narrower group, composed of those elect Jews who do believe that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. Thus all of the blessings enumerated by Paul in Romans 9:4-5, were indeed experienced by “all Israel” throughout the unfolding drama of redemption in the Old Testament. But “true Israel”—the elect remnant according to grace—believed the promise of God to justify sinners and so the members of true Israel are those who call upon God to save them from their sins. Thus God fulfills his purposes and keeps his promises. But to understand how he does so, we must keep the distinction between all Israel and true Israel in mind.

The reason there are two groups in view throughout these chapters (all Israel and true Israel) is found in the merciful but mysterious purposes of God. Just as God had chosen Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau to be objects of his mercy, so too, God by-passes the others, leaving them to the consequences of

their own sins. Despite the objections of some who think that divine sovereignty is unfair, God is free to raise up whomever he wishes so as to demonstrate his justice and fulfill his ultimate purposes. Paul reminds his reader of the story of Pharaoh to make the point that like it or not, God does exactly this, and when we object that such is not fair, Paul's answer is that sinful creatures have no right to talk back to God. Who are sinful creatures to tell God what he can and cannot do? Those who are members of true Israel are recipients of God's mercy, while all Israel chooses to remain in sin. The one group (true Israel) gets mercy (which they do not deserve), while the other group (all Israel) gets justice (which they do deserve).

In Romans 9:30-10:13, Paul makes the point that the members of "all Israel" (i.e., national Israel, the Jews) mistakenly understand the promises God made to Israel through the lens of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Thus covenant God made with Moses supposedly supercedes the covenant of grace God made with Abraham. Because of this very serious error, Israel sought to pursue personal righteousness not through faith (as did Abraham), but as though such righteousness could be obtained through good works. Therefore, when Jesus Christ came to redeem his people from their sins, tragically, the Jews rejected him. From Paul's vantage point, Israel's own Messiah became a stumbling stone, because, *if* people believe that righteousness comes through good works, what need then is there for a Savior? And so in Romans 9:33, Paul cites from both Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16, to make the point that Israel's rejection of the Messiah was likewise foretold in the Old Testament. None of what has happened to Israel is an accident or has caught God unaware. God is fulfilling his purposes for Jew and for Gentile, just as he has chosen Jacob over Esau and hardened Pharaoh's heart.

But we must make no mistake about it as to where to place the responsibility for Israel's unbelief. Even though God is absolutely sovereign, the people of Israel are absolutely responsible for their own rejection of Jesus Christ. It is not as though the people of Israel were apathetic to the demands of the law. In fact, the Israelites zealously sought personal righteousness. The problem is that Israel's zeal is not according to knowledge and so the Jews sought to establish a righteousness of their own through obedience and good works. In doing this, they refused to submit to God's righteousness which is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, because he alone has fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of God's commandments. Jesus is the one to whom the entire Mosaic economy pointed.

Having defined these two kinds of righteousness—that which is by obedience and condemns, because it cannot cover human sinfulness, and that which is by faith and justifies, i.e., the righteousness of Christ imputed to all of those who believe—Paul now makes the point that the latter kind of righteousness is that righteousness which comes through faith is freely available to all who believe. As God was near to Israel through the types and shadows of the Mosaic economy, now that the messianic age has dawned, God draws near in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, for Paul, that God is near is evident when we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord (a basic confession of the deity of Jesus) and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead (faith). Faith in Christ and confession of him as Lord is the supreme sign that God has drawn near to his people in ways which far transcend the types and shadows of the Old Testament. Since faith alone is the means through which we receive this justifying righteousness, this proves beyond all doubt that a justifying righteousness cannot come through good works or through faith and obedience, as some are now erroneously teaching.¹

To reinforce this point, Paul now cites from Joel 2:32—*“everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord*

¹ I am thinking here of people like Norman Shepherd and Steve Schlissel.

will be saved.” Paul does this to bring the universal nature of God’s mercy underlying the Gentile mission out into the fore. Since Christ has come and fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law, a righteousness is freely available to all who call upon Jesus Christ to save them from their sins. And this righteousness, freely offered to all, is the basis for preaching the gospel beyond the narrow confines of Israel. It extends to the very ends of the earth and encompasses all the Gentile nations.

Keeping the big picture in mind, we now turn to our text, Romans 10:14-21.

K The tip off that Paul is changing gears a bit, is the familiar Pauline conjunction, “how, then,” (*oun*– “therefore”) followed by a series of questions. The citation of Joel 2:32 in the previous verse and the reference to the fact that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord who will be saved, raises a series of questions as to how it is that people will actually call upon the name of the Lord. How does calling upon the name of the Lord fit within God’s sovereign purposes, since Paul has already stated that salvation depends upon divine election? If the end is that those chosen according to God’s purpose will be called and justified, what are the divinely-appointed means by which this takes place (cf. Romans 8:28-30)? How is this idea of “calling upon the name of the Lord” connected to Paul’s previous comments to the effect that belief and confession are required if people are to be saved from the wrath that is to come (Romans 10:9-10)? Therefore, Paul’s universalism—the necessity of preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth—will now be given theological justification. The ends (who will be saved) must be connected to the means (how God’s elect come to faith). The connection between end and means is the gospel, that through which God’s justifying righteousness is freely revealed.

Given the immediate context of Romans 9:30-10:21, which includes Paul’s point that Israel is responsible for her own present state of unbelief (*apistis*), Paul cites a number of Old Testament texts to prove his point that “Israel cannot plead ignorance [to God’s purpose]: God has made his purposes clear in both the OT (note the six OT quotations in vv. 14-21) and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. So the fault rests with Israel: she has been ‘disobedient and obstinate’ (v. 21; cf. v. 16).”²

Therefore, the reason that all Israel has not called upon the name of the Lord, while the believing remnant (“true Israel”) and countless Gentiles have, cannot be attributed to the fact that Israel has not heard the gospel. On the contrary, with the coming of Christ and the dawn of the messianic age, the gospel has been proclaimed to Israel. And since everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved—hearing the gospel is a prerequisite to calling upon the name of the Lord—it is absolutely vital for Paul to demonstrate that Israel has indeed heard the gospel and that the nation is thereby fully responsible for not believing that which has been proclaimed. As Paul sees it, there is no contradiction whatsoever between the fact that God can sovereignly be merciful to those whom he wills, while men and women are at the same time fully responsible for not believing.

The grammar of the series of questions demonstrates that “verse 14 and the first part of v. 15 contain a series of four parallel rhetorical questions, each beginning with the interrogative ‘how.’ By repeating the verb from the end of one question at the beginning of the next, Paul creates a connected chain of steps that must be followed if a person is to be saved.”³ As he put it in verse 13, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can people call upon the Lord unless they know of him? And

² Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 663.

³ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 663.

how can they know of him unless someone preaches Christ to them? And how can someone preach to them, if they are not sent? Obviously, there are a number of important “cause and effect” theological relationships here, all connected to the gospel as the divinely appointed means by which God’s elect are called to faith in Jesus Christ and to the church’s duty to commission and send preachers of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Thus the Gentile mission and the preaching of the gospel are also inseparable in Paul’s mind. The fact that a justifying righteousness is freely available to all who call upon the name of Jesus Christ, means that the gospel which reveals that righteousness from God must be preached to the nations.

Paul’s series of questions are spelled out in verses 14-15: *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”* There are four conditions raised by this series of questions. They are as follows. 1). How can people call on the one they have not believed in? 2). How can they believe when they have not heard? 3). How can they hear without someone preaching? 4). How can someone preach unless they are sent? The end must be connected to the means.

As is typical in Paul’s letters, the questions are obviously rhetorical and the answer to all of them is, “they cannot.” Paul’s citation of Isaiah 52:7 (part of our Old Testament lesson this morning) is quite interesting. Not only does Isaiah affirm the importance of preaching—*“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”*—but the verse is cited to prove that the conditions that Paul has just set forth have already been met! The gospel has been preached to Israel, just as her own prophets foretold that it would be. Since the dawn of the messianic age and the coming of messianic forerunner, John the Baptist, and with the coming of Jesus Christ who preached about the kingdom of God throughout all Israel, and with the commissioning of the apostles by Jesus Christ, the gospel has been repeatedly proclaimed to Israel. Indeed, all four of the conditions Paul sets out have been met and still Israel does not believe, a point that Paul makes in verse 16. *“But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’”*

Sadly, the reason why “all Israel” is presently cut-off and in a state of unbelief with only the elect remnant according to grace calling upon the name of the Lord, is because Israel did not accept the gospel when it was preached to them. In rejecting that gospel, Jesus has become Israel’s stumbling stone. And now, Isaiah’s lament over God’s people becomes the apostle Paul’s lament. Thus Paul can conclude in verse 17. *“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”*

Throughout this entire section of Romans, Paul has connected the hearing of the gospel with the response of faith, i.e., believing and confessing and “calling upon the Lord.” Here, so to speak, Paul connects the dots between cause and effect. Faith (the effect) comes from hearing—specifically the hearing of the good news (the gospel) when it is preached. The message which creates faith (the cause) is the gospel, which is directly connected to the word of Christ, i.e. God’s promise to save sinners who call upon his name. Thus, whenever the gospel is preached, God calls his elect to faith as defined in Romans 10:9-10: *“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”* Thus the end—which is the elect Gentiles and the believing remnant in Israel coming to faith—and means (the preaching of the gospel) are necessarily connected. God has not only chosen whom he will save, he has chosen the means by which he will save them.

But the very thought of this connection once again brings Paul’s own people to mind. His heart turns

back toward the fate of Israel in verses 18-21. From the questions he asked in verses 18-19, to the answers he gave in verses 20-21, Paul is convinced that the present state of affairs for Israel was foretold in the Scriptures. *“But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”* Again I ask: *Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.’ And Isaiah boldly says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.’ But concerning Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.’”*

From all of this it is clear that all Israel has heard the gospel. But hearing the gospel and believing the gospel are two different things. By citing from Psalm 19 which deals with the revelation of God in nature (through nature, the knowledge of God goes out to the ends of the earth), Paul is making the case that the gospel has gone out (or at least will go out) to the ends of the earth. The preaching of the gospel knows no bounds, even as the general revelation of God through nature knows no bounds. Therefore, Paul either believes that the gospel has been preached to much of the known Roman world of his day (Rome was considered to be the end of the earth), or, if he is speaking eschatologically, the gospel will be preached to ends of the whole earth before the Lord returns. But in either case, we must not miss Paul’s main point—all Israel has already heard the gospel, but only the elect remnant have come to faith.

Next, Paul turns to the question as to whether or not Israel understood what was preached. The apostle quotes a text from Deuteronomy 32:31, the Song of Moses, in which Moses recounts the wonderful redemptive acts of God, something the Gentiles would not have known. Paul is laying the groundwork for a point he will make in the following chapter, namely, that Israel’s rejection of her own Messiah has become the means by which the gospel has gone out to all the Gentile nations. And if the Gentiles—who don’t have the Old Testament—can understand the gospel when it is preached to them, Israel certainly should understand the gospel, especially given the nation’s preeminent role in redemptive history.

Then Paul cites Isaiah 65:1, to make the point that Isaiah had foreseen and therefore predicted Israel’s present condition along with the inclusion of the Gentiles in the blessings of the messianic age, especially the supreme blessing of calling upon the name of the Lord and receiving the gift of a justifying righteousness. Paul also quotes from verse 2 of Isaiah 65, to summarize his argument about Israel’s own culpability for not believing the gospel. *“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”* Throughout redemptive history, God has been longsuffering and patient with his people. But Israel does not believe the gospel, because Israel does not want to believe the gospel! Even as Israel’s own prophets foretold of the messianic age in terms of a great harvest among the Gentiles, when the nations of the earth would worship Israel’s God, and even as those same prophets foretold of how God would save a believing remnant from among the Israelites, so too, the prophets foretell that when the messianic age dawns, Israel will not believe the promise and tragically fall under the covenant curses. But none of this is by accident and God has ordained Israel’s stumbling over the gospel, to ensure that the gospel went out to the ends of the earth. Furthermore, God is not finished with Israel. Her salvation is yet to come.

As we conclude, we note that Paul makes a number of important theological points here in the context of his broader argument about the place of Israel in the on-going drama of redemptive history in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. It is important to summarize them at this point before we move into Romans 11, next time.

First, Paul’s discussion in Romans 10:13 about “calling upon the name of the Lord,” takes place against

the backdrop of his doctrine of election (cf. Romans 8:28-30—“*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified,*” and Paul’s comments in Romans 9:16—“*it does not depend upon man’s desire or efforts, but on God’s mercy*”). Therefore, God’s election of sinners according to his merciful purposes underlies the promise that “*whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*” People who are dead in sin and who don’t seek God, will not call upon the name of the Lord, *until* God makes them alive in Christ (regenerates) through the preaching of the gospel. Both elect Gentiles as well as the elect remnant according to grace (true Israel), will indeed call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

Second, Paul specifically connects the preaching of the gospel to the hearing of faith. Given the previous point, it is clear that God determines who will be saved as well as the means by which he will save them. Thus Paul connects the ends—who will be saved—with the means by which God will save them—the preaching of the gospel. This is why the Reformed speak of the gospel as means of grace and why we believe that the Holy Spirit works through the preaching of the word of God, and through the sacraments, the signs and seals of the promises made in the word of God.

Thus when we as Reformed Christians champion the doctrine of predestination, we must also champion the cause of preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth. If we believe the one, we must practice the other. Far too often, Reformed Christians understand God’s sovereignty in terms of an armchair debate, something interesting to speculate about and oft-times useful in agitating evangelical friends and family who are not Reformed. But anyone who believes in sovereign election must understand this doctrine as a call to action—to support the church’s missionary endeavor through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, not only in the local church, but in the establishment of new churches, both locally and abroad. To believe in election is to believe in missions. In the context of Romans 9-11, Paul’s point is that God is working out his purposes for both Jew and Gentile, and that the Gentile mission is not incidental nor accidental, it is God’s means of bringing his elect to faith and fulfilling his purposes. And when that Gentile mission runs its course, God will redeem Israel at the end of the age.

Third, calling upon the name of the Lord is equated with confessing Jesus as Lord (deity) and believing that God raised him from the dead. This means that the preaching of the gospel must be centered in the communication of the basic facts of the gospel. It also means that when we engage in evangelism, we must likewise focus upon the facts of the gospel. The gospel is the divinely-chosen means through which God will bring his people to faith in Jesus Christ. Without the preaching or communication of the gospel, how can people hear, believe and confess? It has been said, “getting it right, comes before getting it out.” But once we get it right, we must take the gospel to the end of earth.

It will come as no surprise that what concerns me the most about the current state of the Reformed church is that we have forgotten half of the equation. Getting the gospel right is absolutely essential—not as an end in itself, but so that we can proclaim the saving message of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Once we get the gospel right, we must preach it! Thus all missionary and evangelistic efforts begin with understanding the gospel correctly. But they do not end with understanding the gospel correctly! They end with proclamation from my lips from the pulpit as well as from yours to your neighbors.

Fourth, in the context of Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11, since the preaching of the gospel enables God’s elect to call upon him in faith, Paul speaks of the necessity of preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth, thereby establishing the boundaries of the church’s mission. Thus as Paul sees it, the dawn of

the messianic age is the dawn of the age of mission and evangelism. Not only is this strong evidence in favor of the free and universal offer of the gospel, it supports Paul's point that the very of the gospel demands that it must be preached to ends of the earth. Even as Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ becomes the occasion for the gospel to go to the Gentiles, nevertheless, the nature of the gospel, defines the Gentile mission. The nature of the gospel demands universal proclamation.

Finally, Paul speaks of messengers of the gospel being sent in an official capacity by the church—"how shall they hear unless they are sent." This presupposes the church as that divinely-appointed body which commissions and sends messengers to proclaim the good news that God will save all of those who call upon his name. Thus missions and evangelism are distinctly churchly endeavors. To proclaim the gospel and lead someone to Christ, is to lead them to Christ's church. The apostle Paul could not conceive of filling a stadium full of people, entertaining them with Christian celebrities, testimonies and music, preaching some kind of tepid Christian message to them before inviting them to accept Jesus as their personal lord and savior, and then say to them, "well, the show's over, see you later . . . Hope you show up at church!" No, biblical missions and evangelism is a churchly function, since to become a Christian is to become a member of Christ's body, and Christ's body exists in the form of the local church. Even as Paul connects cause with effect, he connects faith in Christ and confession of him as Lord, to membership in Christ's church.

Beloved, faith in Christ comes from hearing the gospel. It is such a simple message—Christ died for us, even while we were sinners. He was raised from the dead for our justification. He will save anyone who calls upon his name from that day of wrath which is coming upon the earth. But it is such a powerful message that through it God raises the dead, creates faith in the heart and provides sinners with a perfect righteousness. For in the gospel, God draws near and gives us everything we need for our redemption. And he freely offers this to us all, if in faith we simply call upon his name and believe his promise to save us from our sins. So let us confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, with the knowledge that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord, will be saved. Amen!