

Romans 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 10 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

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.

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart 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. Because 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.

For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the scripture says, Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.

[1 : 09] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. For the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news! But they have not all obeyed the gospel.

For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard?

Indeed they have, for their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world. But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation.

[2 : 07] With a foolish nation I will make you angry. Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, I have been found by those who did not seek me. I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.

But of Israel he says, All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people. In Romans chapter 10, Paul continues to address the great question and the tragedy of Israel's failure to receive the gospel message.

Israel had not attained to the righteousness by faith, although Gentiles had. Rather Israel had stumbled upon the stumbling stone. Paul begins by expressing his deep desire that Israel come to know God's salvation, which they were currently rejecting.

He addresses the Roman Christians here as brothers. Earlier in chapter 9 verse 3, he spoke of the Jews as his brothers, his kinsmen according to the flesh. He wants the Romans to join with him in his desire for his fellow Jews' salvation.

As in the case of Paul himself prior to his conversion, the Jews are zealous for God, but their zeal is tragically ignorant. They fail to recognize how God has actually acted.

[3 : 15] They have been ignorant of the righteousness of God, oblivious to God's act of saving justice enacted in Jesus the Messiah, a saving righteousness by which God justifies the ungodly, bringing people into good standing with himself, without respect to ancestry, covenant membership, Torah observance or status.

Israel, however, has sought to establish its own standing with God on the basis of the Torah, through covenant membership and Torah observance. While the failure of Israel that Paul is speaking about here is a more general failure, it is a failure revealed at a crucial moment. When it really counted, when the Messiah came, Israel dropped the ball. When God acted decisively in their history, revealing his righteousness, they should have submitted to it, recognizing the surprising manner of God's action in Christ, and joyfully receiving it.

However, that was not what happened. Instead, they were blind to what God was doing in Christ, and rather than receiving it, they rejected and opposed it in unbelief. The point here isn't so much that Israel was trying to earn their own salvation, as many have understood it.

Rather, Israel perceived its standing with God to be a matter of their own covenant status and Torah observance. In many respects, this was an understandable and reasonable belief.

[4 : 32] It wasn't a belief that they could earn salvation, nor was it a belief in the necessity of absolutely perfect obedience. Rather, it was the belief that, when God's saving justice appeared, it would be shown to people deemed more worthy, i.e. Torah-observant Jews.

Living in a Torah-observant way, as a people set apart from the Gentiles, was a good and necessary thing in its time, provided that they never forgot that these things were never the ultimate basis of their standing with God.

That was God's grace alone. However, when God's long-awaited saving justice, the righteousness of God, was revealed, it took an unexpected form. At this point, Israel faced a choice.

Would they submit to what God was doing, or would they continue to insist upon pursuing their standing with God in the way of Torah observance? Would they relate to God on his own terms, recognising the more temporary role that the law was playing in God's purposes?

Or would they cling on to a status gained from the law, even when God was establishing his new covenant people on a very different footing? Jesus the Messiah is the goal at which the law always aimed, with everyone who believes enjoying good standing with God on the basis of what Christ has achieved.

[5 : 46] In Christ, the law arrives at its intended destination, accomplishing its design. The law was never a bad thing to be abolished, but a good thing to be fulfilled.

The problem was not with the law itself, as Paul argues, the law is spiritual. Rather, the problem was always with sinful flesh, and its allergic reaction to the law. In Christ, the law can finally achieve its intended goal, as the righteous requirement of the law can be fulfilled in us, as we walk no longer according to the flesh, but according to the spirit.

The meaning of Paul's statement in verses 5-11 may not be immediately obvious, and has provoked much debate, as many other things in the book of Romans. One of the more jarring things is the fact that Paul seems to be juxtaposing the righteousness that is based on the law, and the righteousness based on faith.

However, if this is Paul's intent, he seems to be using the wrong verses to do so. He alludes to Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 as the statement of the righteousness of the law. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules.

If a person does them, he shall live by them. I am the Lord. Yet the verses around which he structures his proclamation of the righteousness of faith are taken from Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 11-14.

[7 : 01] If we read verses 11-20, we'll get a better sense of the original context. For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven that you should say, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us?

That we may hear it and do it. But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

[8 : 06] I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.

For he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. Robert Alter, commenting upon the teaching of these verses, remarks that Deuteronomy, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in the text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods.

It is the daring hero of the pagan epic who, unlike ordinary men, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the secret of immortality. This mythological and heroic era is at an end, for God's word inscribed in a book has become the intimate property of every person.

The law contains great depths and wealth of wisdom, but it isn't far off from anyone. This word is in the mouths of Israel and can be in their hearts as they memorise it, meditate upon it, learn its principles of wisdom, delight in it, and sing it forth, and display its principles from the very heart of their lives.

Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 6 describes this sort of relationship with the law. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

[9 : 37] And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. The law is at its heart a remarkably democratic document. It isn't written merely for a scribal, judicial, or royal elite.

It doesn't require the great feats of epic heroes, the deep learning of philosophers, or the wandering of mystical pilgrims. It is written for the learning, understanding, and practice of every Israelite, from the least to the greatest.

It isn't a shadowy and arbitrary set of principles imposed upon them from without, but a book full of rationales, explanations, and persuasion, designed to enlist the will, the desires, and the understanding.

God is close to every Israelite, not just to the high priest, the sage, the prophet, or the king. Now Paul is not a careless reader of the scriptures. It seems strange that he would use a reworked text advocating for the keeping of the law as his clincher text for the righteousness of faith over against the righteousness of the law.

What is he doing here? One thing to note here is that Deuteronomy chapter 30 is the great passage about God's work of grace in the future, the work by which he will restore his wayward people, circumcising their hearts in verse 6, so that they will love him as they ought and live.

[10 : 52] This is what it will look like when the law finally gives the life it intended, through an utterly unmerited act of divine grace. Perhaps, rather than presenting a great contrast between the righteousness of faith in verses 6-11 and the righteousness of the law in verse 5, Paul is actually revealing a fundamental continuity.

So perhaps verse 6 should begin with an and rather than a but. The word of Christ that is believed is the divine word that has graciously come near to us so that we might receive it and have life.

The statement of Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 that the person who does these things will live by them is fulfilled in the covenant restoring and establishing act of God by which his word comes so very near to us entering into our very hearts.

Nevertheless, we should notice that even in the fulfillment there remains a contrast. The word of the law is primarily a word of command to be obeyed and done. The word of Christ is primarily a word of promise and grace to be believed and confessed.

Salvation and the promised restoration of the new covenant comes with the believing reception of this word of the gospel the message that Jesus is Lord. As Richard Hayes observes, Paul has also mixed the Deuteronomy 30 quotation with an expression found elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy particularly in chapter 8 verse 17 and 9 verse 4 Beware lest you say in your heart my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth and then in chapter 9 verse 4 Do not say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you Paul probably hopes that attentive readers will pick up on these echoes both of these texts underline the sheer grace by which Israel enjoys its standing with God and its place in the land likewise the reception of the word of Christ does not depend upon the great deeds of heroes the lofty wisdom of sages or the powers

of human rulers in God's action in the gospel his revelation has come near to us all in a way that reaches directly into our unworthy condition wherever we may find ourselves he doesn't require great feats of bravery genius or power of us just the reception of faith by which we can be saved the law called for obedience as the means of life however the law also promised that

[13:18] God in a great act of grace would realize the law's intention for a people who are unfaithful and would unavoidably come under the law's curse in their history the law was not merely command but was also promise and in Paul's movement from Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 to Deuteronomy chapter 30 Paul follows the shift from command to promise and manifest the fulfillment of the promise that has occurred in Christ Christ is God's revelation come near to us all so that the law might be fulfilled and humanity restored in relationship with God salvation is now made accessible for everyone who believes the promise of the gospel is a universal one God is the God of all Jews and Gentiles alike referencing Joel chapter 2 verse 32 who prophesies concerning the great day of the Lord when the fortunes of Israel will be restored and reversed Paul declares that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved this also prepares us for some of the points that he will go on to make about

Israel in the following chapter in verses 14 to 15 Paul expresses the Gentile mission in terms of this new covenant fulfillment framework for the prophecy of an indiscriminate gift of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike to be fulfilled the message needs to go out to Gentiles which is where Paul's own work fits in quoting Isaiah chapter 52 verse 7 he describes the wonderful character of the heralds of the good news or the gospel the message that Jesus is Lord that God is establishing his kingdom in his son yet not everyone who hears the message of Paul's gospel responds with obedient submission to Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord the gospel as the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus the Messiah is not just a message that we can take or leave we must bow the knee to Christ or else stand in rebellion against him just as Isaiah expressed the widespread rejection of his message so Paul's gospel proclamation is widely rejected even among Gentiles faith comes from the heard report and the heard report comes through the word of Christ that has come near to mankind in the incarnation death and resurrection of

Christ God's revelation of his son Jesus Christ the word that has come near to us is what drives and lies at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel Paul quotes Psalm 19 verse 4 in an admittedly rather confusing verse as usual we should pay attention to the context Psalm 19 verses 1 to 4 speak of the universal revelation of the glory of God by the heavens the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork day to day pours out speech and night to night reveals knowledge there is no speech nor are there words whose voice is not heard their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world perhaps Paul's point here is that no one not even the Gentiles are without excuse while the word of God has come near in Jesus and the proclamation of the word of the gospel it is not as if the Gentiles were completely without revelation God has already spoken to them in the creation itself the chapter ends with a statement of the truth that Israel had not been left without warnings of this situation of the good news of God's kingdom and his saving justice going to the Gentiles while they rejected it they should have known he quotes from

Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 21 and Isaiah chapter 65 verse 1 and then verse 2 in such places Israel had already been warned by God that as they rejected the gospel God's grace would be shown to people who had never sought it ultimately with the effect of moving Israel to jealousy Paul is here returning to some of the points with which he concluded chapter 9 and setting things up for the chapter that follows a question to consider how does the connection between the promise of Deuteronomy chapter 30 and the call to live by the law in Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 help us to understand the proper place of the law in the larger picture and story of scripture

