

Prayer

Father, we worship You. Treat us carefully we pray, and when our lives do not make sense and nothing appears to work for good, then touch us with such knowing love that we retain our trust in You. Give us, we pray, a sufficient glimpse of our future, that we can live each day and both bear the heartaches and enjoy the thrill of life as lived for You. Father, we worship You; AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Retailing

Pray for people you know who are employed in retailing. Ask the Lord to protect them against temptation to wrongdoing and ask the Lord to keep them safe, spiritually and physically.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the strength and courage God has given you
- Pray about fishing, and the way it is policed and controlled
- Pray about racial tensions in the world, and against all racism

Meditation

In a moment, a word is said or something is done,
And everything is changed for ever.
Light is shone into a darkened room,
Or can be extinguished, we know not why.

The way of the Spirit is just as mysterious;
But the outcome of His work is sure.
If a doorway fails to open, somewhere, another does
It is not fate, but the hand of God to touch our lives for good.

So when our world falls in upon us,
And nothing makes sense at all;
It's better to know the Spirit cares for your soul
Than take pot luck with chance.

It is when faith and life are tested to the limit
That God builds in us the person we are made to be ...

Bible Study - Romans 9:30-10:4

³⁰ What then are we to say? That the Gentiles who did not pursue a right relationship with God have obtained it; that is, the righteousness of faith; ³¹ but Israel, who strove for a right relationship with God by means of the law, did not succeed in this path. ³² And why not? Because they sought it through what they did and not by faith. They tripped up on the 'stumbling-stone'. ³³ As it is written:

'Look, I am setting in Zion a stone that makes people stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.'

^{10:1} Friends, my heart's desire and my prayer for them to God is that they may be saved. ² I testify for them that they have a zeal for God, but it is misguided. ³ For without knowledge of how God puts people in a right relationship with Himself, and by attempting to sort it out for themselves, they have not submitted to God's way of doing this. ⁴ Christ is the completion of the Law, so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Review

In this passage, Paul speaks plainly about Jesus, the Gospel, the Jews, and the Gentiles; and analyses how God's plan of salvation has been received. The reason why this passage is relatively easy for us to understand is because Paul writes straightforwardly about the responsibility Jews and Gentiles have for the way they respond to the Gospel, and it is language that is easy for us to follow. He says that the Gentiles had no history of contact with Almighty God and many accepted Him by faith on hearing the Good News

about Jesus (9:30). The Jews, however, found it hard to accept the Gospel because they already thought they knew the right way to do what God wanted, through the law (9:31), so he quoted a prophecy to them from their own Scriptures, about tripping over a stumbling stone placed there by God (9:33). Paul then muses about the reasons for the Jewish failure to submit to God's ways (10:1-4).

Here, Paul appears less upset about the problem of the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews than he did earlier, and writes more objectively. At the beginning of chapter 9, Paul showed his grievous upset at the fact that most Jews were rejecting the message of the Gospel (9:1f.). For him, unless Jewish people placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah, they stood condemned before God. The thought of this condemnation horrified Paul, but in addition, some Jews objected by saying that if the Gospel was true, then all God's promises to the Jews in the past must have been faulty (9:6). The rest of chapter 9 up to our passage today contains Paul's response to this charge, describing the sovereign right of God to organise His plan of salvation as He wishes. It was only right that Paul should place God's right to do what He wants with His Creation before anything else; and he went on to write about the response of Jews and Gentiles to the Gospel.

The tragedy of the whole scenario painted in this passage is that the Jewish people had been warned plenty of times by their own prophets about what would happen if they continued to rebel against God. Paul's quote from Isaiah in verse 33 (a mixture of Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14 which also appears in Psalm 118:22) is typical of the sayings of Isaiah, probably Israel's greatest prophet, and it is used by the New Testament on a number of occasions to explain why the Jews responded to the Gospel as they did (see also 1 Peter 2:6-8). Jesus Himself alluded to this prophecy when talking about the same thing (Luke 20:17,18).

Paul explains that the Jews stumbled because they were misguided (10:2), preferring to find their own solutions to life's problems rather than God's. What he meant was this. In the hundreds of years between the prophecies of Isaiah and the time of Jesus, the Jews had not sought to work out why the prophets had all spoken so stridently about how God's people had failed in their attempts to live by the law. They simply went back to attempting to redefine and re-analyse the law and apply it to every minute facet of life, and this was the Judaism of the day into which Jesus was born. It is what Jesus fought against, to the point where His opponents had Him killed. Their eyes were on their own solutions to life's problems, not God's, and the result was that they rejected and killed their own Messiah!

As we read these words, Christians should consider two things. Firstly how best to deal with their own relationships with Jewish people who to this day are either 'Messianic' and have accepted Jesus Christ, or who remain one of the many sects of Judaism that have evolved from the Jewish nation of Jesus' day, and quite separate from the Christian church. Secondly, they should consider whether they are themselves in danger of ignoring the true Gospel in the vain belief that they have found their own solutions to sin. Are we truly 'submissive' to Christ (10:3)?

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- A just conclusion
- Paul's earnest prayer
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Going Deeper

At the heart of this passage is what appears to be a quote from the Old Testament. As we look at what Paul says in this passage, we will find that this quote is not straightforward, and it is strongly related to Jesus' own ministry and method of using Old Testament Scripture. In a subtle way it does explain why the Jewish people rejected the Messiah, and it is at the heart of Jesus' own understanding of His ministry.

A just conclusion

Paul's explanation of the situation that exists between Jews and Gentiles is as true today as it was in his own day. In the Church of God, anyone is free to hear and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and they do so in large numbers across the world, whatever statistics may say about the decline of the Church in the West! The Church of God is largely made up of Gentiles who have obtained the 'righteousness of faith' (9:30), though because of the passage of time, there are dangers within. For example, there is a prevalent sin in too many churches which suggests that providing someone is a churchgoer and nominally accepts what is done, we should not ask any deeper questions about a person's salvation before Almighty God. Such blindness risks being tripped over the same 'stumbling block' which trapped the Jews of old, by failing to take account of the work of Jesus Christ who alone is our means of salvation!

Israel had all the benefits of the revelation of God from Abraham through to the prophets, as recorded in the Old Testament, but they 'did not succeed in this path' (9:31). In order to understand why this is so, we need to understand something about how Jewish people of Jesus' day viewed the Scriptures, and it is not

commonly known by Christians that they did not hold the Old Testament to be God's Word in the same way that Christians do. The traditional Protestant stance is that the entire Bible is God's Word, and even if we do not happen to understand this or that section, there is no reason not to value it alongside the rest. The general Jewish belief is different. Their belief was that the 'Law', by which they mean the first five books of the Bible, consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, was the core 'Word of God' which defines all else. The 'Prophets' (including the historical books of Samuel and Kings, because they tell the stories of prophets such as Samuel, and Elijah as much as that of kings) were regarded as of secondary importance and thought of as offering comment upon the Law. Lastly, the writings (including books such as Psalms, Job, Proverbs etc) were regarded as of lesser significance to the prophets.

I explain this because the seismic change which took place when Jesus lived and taught was that He refused to allow the Law to be the determining factor in any Scriptural understanding of God's will. He accepted the Law and claimed to fulfil it (Matt 5:17f.) but made it clear throughout His ministry that the Word of God was interpreted through the Prophets; indeed, He frequently interpreted the Law by using the prophets! This is what Paul accepted when He became a Christian. He had to re-think the way he used the Bible and agree with Jesus that all of God's Word was important, and in particular, the way in which the prophets explained the truth about God, as learned through the centuries by people who sought to put into practice the 'laws' of God.

Paul's quote in verse 33 'Look, I am setting in Zion a stone ... and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.' is not therefore a straight quote from Isaiah 28:16 or 8:14, or Psalm 118:22 for that matter. It is a combination of them all, put together to make a point, just as Jesus did in a similar but slightly different way in Luke 20:17,18 (see also Matt 21:42 and Mark 12:10,11), and as Peter did in 1 Peter 2:6,7. This quote is an example of the liberty Paul felt in using the Prophets and also the writings of Scripture to explain the Law, something that would have been anathema to a Jew, and yet it explained very well what had happened in the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ. The prophets foretold that God's own people would slip up on a 'foundation stone' which was an essential part of their own faith in God, and some of them, like Isaiah, reveal that the stumbling block will be the Messiah. Throughout the New Testament, this prophecy is fulfilled; the 'stumbling block' for the Jewish people is Jesus' claim through his life and ministry to be God's Messiah. The Jews preferred their own attempts to find a right relationship with God through the Law rather than accept that their Messiah had come in Jesus and fulfilled their law.

Paul's earnest prayer

Despite making himself very clear and remaining resolute in his defence of the Gospel in the face of his personal angst at the state of his fellow Jews, Paul does not give one inch in his understanding and interpretation of the Gospel. He resolves his concerns by offering earnest prayer for other Jews, and despite everything, he will not retract any part of his preaching of the Gospel in order to offer them a lifeline. The reason is simple, it is God's task to resolve the question of the status of His people, not Paul's. All he can do is offer both prayer and his own commendation that the people of Israel are full of 'zeal' for God (10:2). Unfortunately, he feels that their zeal is 'misguided'.

Paul's conclusion is that the Jewish people have attempted to do for themselves what God alone can do (10:3), and this is lies at the heart of their rejection of Jesus. They simply do not feel that they need Him in order to have a relationship with God, and do not accept that the prophetic words in their own Scriptures point to the man who was murdered on the Cross near Jerusalem, only decades before this letter was written.

To conclude, Paul quotes Jesus' own statement about Himself; Christ is the 'completion of the law' (Matthew 5:17). The word Paul used for 'completion' is sometimes translated as 'end' or 'fulfilment', and it has two meanings. Firstly, it tells us that Christ sums up the law, for the purpose and the aim of the law in Old Testament times was to help people know the path to God's salvation, and this was 'fulfilled' in Christ. Secondly, the word can also mean 'end' in the sense of 'conclusion', in which case Christ brings the work of the law to an end, and it is no longer required as a means of salvation. This is also true, but we should remember Paul's words which tell us that although the law ceases to be something by which someone can be saved in God's eyes, it still has a role to play in revealing sin (7:7f.). Nevertheless, the Gospel is not about the law, it is about Jesus Christ 'so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.' (10:4) This remains the Gospel to this day.

Application

It is important to remember that when Paul said these words, he did so with love and affection for his fellow Jews, whilst telling them his sincere belief that they were wrong in rejecting Jesus. This remains the position of the Church towards Jews even today. In the intervening history of two thousand years, there has been a great deal of antipathy between Christians and Jews, and on occasions Christians have been guilty of heinous crimes against Jews. Like Paul, it would be wise for Christians to be forthright about belief in Jesus as the Messiah, for this is the heart of our faith. However, we should be willing to be generous of spirit towards those who also seek after God as Jews, and are God's People in a different sense even though they

have rejected Jesus. This is not a 'conflict' that can be resolved in a human way, and neither do we have to defend God from the beliefs of others, for He is the Master of all things and can take care of Himself. There is genuine dispute between Christians and Jews to this day about the path of salvation and the person of Jesus, and if we find ourselves in a position to discuss this with others of different persuasion then we should do so with due humility but without holding back our beliefs. God will resolve the differences between His chosen people the Jews and His chosen people, the Church, at the end times; and in the mean time we bear Paul's heartache until this time comes (11:17f.).

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you had any experience of anti-Semitism? Discuss in your group the consequences of anti-Semitism in the world today.
2. In what sense do people 'stumble' over the rock that is Christ today?
3. How easy do you find it to discuss your faith with people of other faiths such as Jews, who believe something quite different about God? Discuss your reactions.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Is Jesus Christ at the heart of the faith you profess? In what way? This is a question that I ask myself, and we can all benefit from asking this of ourselves from time to time. It is too easy to become relatively comfortable in our faith and forget the basics that drive our faith. The sure way to keep Jesus at the centre of our lives is to read the Bible and to pray, for these are the essential features of a genuine relationship with Jesus, and this is the only path of faith the Gospel advocates. Of course, the way this works out for each of us is infinitely varied, by the mercy of God!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

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Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN
