



## “The Stumbling Stone”<sup>1</sup>

### Romans 9:30-33

Last year, my sister, Kendra Davito, participated in and completed an Ironman race. For those here who know what an Ironman is, your eyes get big and you probably thought, “Wow!” For those who don’t know what an Ironman is, let me explain what it entails. It starts with a 2.4 mile swim, then a 112-mile bike ride, and then there’s a full marathon (26.2 mile). This is a full 140 miles! For most people, it’s an all-day race.

Kendra participated in Louisville, KY – and before the race, the weather caused pretty choppy waters in the river; so, they had to change some details of the race – shortening the swim. And, as a result, it would change the checkpoint times. Because, you see, they don’t only require you to finish the race, but you have to finish within a certain timeframe – making checkpoints within those timeframes.

Unfortunately, the head of this race didn’t communicate clearly on when they were supposed to finish. People were making it through checkpoints, but when they arrived at the finish line, they said, “Sorry, you didn’t finish in time.” For some of these people, they expected the time they were told. Enough people were angry at the lack of communication that Ironman decided to give them the title of Ironman.

But, can you imagine if you were a person who was disqualified from the race? Kendra told me of one person who began to crawl during the marathon because his legs seized up and wouldn’t work. Others who ended the race because they were so cold during the biking portion. These people who trained so long and tried so hard didn’t receive the prize. In reality, it doesn’t matter how hard you work if you’re disqualified. If you’re disqualified, you’re disqualified. You can’t say, “But I ran every day. I biked. I swam! I bought new running clothes!” Disqualification means you didn’t make it according to the rules.

This is somewhat like how Paul is talking in Romans 9. If you remember, entering into Romans 9, Paul is discussing how God is faithful to his promises towards the Jews – even while he’s giving tremendous blessings to the Gentiles. Keep in mind that the Roman church is actually comprised of more Gentiles than Jews. The reason for this was that in the 40’s, there was a disturbance amongst the Jews (probably over the disagreement with Jesus). All Jews left Rome, but Gentile Christians remained in the city. The church grew, and in time, Jews came back into the city. Jewish Christians then had to learn how to incorporate with Gentile Christians. It led to confusion over traditions and practices within the church – and even how they should relate to each other.

Paul, in writing Romans, seeks to address God’s saving plan and how Jesus came to save people from all over the world. But this could still confuse the Jewish people. In their thinking, they’d generally believe that God is going to save *many* Jews and a remnant of Gentiles. But here in Romans 9, Paul has shown

---

<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

from the Old Testament that God promised to save a remnant of Jews and many Gentiles. This is what we discovered two weeks ago, and now we move into the end of Romans 9, with further support for this view. But you could say, “What does this have to do with a race and being disqualified?” Well, this is the illustration Paul uses in the verses we’re studying today. The Jews did not approach God in the way he intended. Therefore, they’ve disqualified themselves. Instead of running to Jesus and trusting him, they tripped over Jesus and many have clung to their own works in defiance of Jesus.

So, if you have your Bibles, turn them to Romans 9, and after I pray, we’ll read verses 30-33. [Pray for the Martins, Robirds, and also for James Enns at Rothbury community.]

---

*<sup>30</sup> What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; <sup>31</sup> but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. <sup>32</sup> Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, <sup>33</sup> as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”<sup>2</sup>*

---

The main idea of these verses is that **Salvation is by Jesus, not by our effort**. But this truth is taught by helping us to see how God relates to Jews and Gentiles. More Gentiles will come to faith than Jews. This is Paul’s teaching here, using the Old Testament teaching. And also, Luke affirms this as well in his account in the book of Acts. In Acts 1:8, Jesus is recorded saying, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Then, as we travel through Acts, we see how the message travels out of Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria – and then starting in chapter 13, all the way through 28, we find Gentile evangelism increasing to the further parts of the Roman empire.

Finally, in chapter 28, Paul is in Rome. In verse 14, Luke records, “And so we came to Rome.” This statement seems to indicate that in making it to Rome, the message is now making it to the uttermost parts of the world. Then, in Rome, Paul speaks of Jesus with the Jewish people. Some receive, others choose to not believe. Then Paul quotes from Isaiah to them. And then he adds a final thought. What he says was told to Isaiah when Isaiah began his prophetic ministry to God’s people, and now Paul is saying this is true in his day as well. So, he says this: “Go to this people, and say, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

**<sup>28</sup> Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”<sup>4</sup>**

God’s plan has always included a remnant of Jews and the Gentile world. But how could this be? The Jews were given all the blessings! Well, at the beginning of Roman 9, Paul reveals that this is all under

---

<sup>2</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:30–33.

<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ac 1:8.

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ac 28:26–28.

the absolute sovereign power of God himself. God has vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath. This is such a great mystery to us, but it's also an amazing comfort that should humble and amaze us. Then here in these verses, we see Paul revealing that another reason why this is the case is because of human responsibility. This is so intriguing. Paul doesn't think that because God planned something then humans are off the hook. There's no contradiction between divine sovereignty and humans being responsible for their actions and choices. In fact, the Bible reveals that God's sovereignty enables human responsibility. So here, we read that one reason why there's only a remnant of Jews saved is because they don't won't trust Jesus. And, like what Paul said in Rome, the Gentiles *will*. In all of this, we see that salvation is only through Jesus, not our works. So, let's look first at the Gentiles.

### 1. Gentiles attain a right standing through faith – embracing Jesus (v. 30).

Read verse 30 with me again: <sup>30</sup>What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith.<sup>5</sup>

The question, "What shall we say then," goes back to what Paul has just said. So, let's rephrase: How is it that Gentiles enter into the state of being called beloved and blessed? What shall we say to this? Well, the only answer. The only way this could happen in time and space is that these Gentiles had faith.

But there's more that Paul is saying here in this text. The Gentiles (meaning, non-Jewish people) did not pursue righteousness. Stop. The word "pursue" is an athletic term. The word "righteousness," in this context, refers to having a right standing before God. For the sake of clarity, let me remind all of us here that humans are not born with a right standing with God. Every human being is born sinful. Now, when you hear that, you might think, "Every human being is vile in their actions," but sin isn't simply external actions. Being sinful refers to our heart towards God. Sinfulness means that we love and value other things, including ourselves, more than we love and value God himself. So, you can be a very moral person, but all your morality is done from a sinful heart – it's not done out of humility towards and love for God's glory supremely.

Paul says in Romans 1:22, Paul says of the Gentile world that, **"<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."<sup>6</sup>** This is how human beings function in this world. We elevate ourselves. We claim wisdom, but we put our glory in lesser, created things like humans and animals. This is the worship defect of our hearts.

**[Go to next point #1 slide.]**

And, I've conversed with people who seem to think this is ok. I have friends who think that as long as they're good, God should be good with them. But they don't love God. They simply want God to relate to them on a morality scale of how good they are. But that's no relationship with God. That's not recognizing who he is and who they are. I'm burdened for this because God is holy and God is worthy to be trusted and followed. He doesn't need our works. He wants our hearts! Yet, so many people think God must be ok with them as long as they're not bad. They want a deistic god (one that doesn't relate and leaves us alone), not the One True God who is the Ruler and created us in his image.

But I want you to notice how Paul speaks of the world in Romans 9. He says that they did not pursue God. In this illustration, it can almost sound like they simply didn't enter the race. But Romans 1 says not

---

<sup>5</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:30.

<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 1:22–23.

only did they not enter the race to attain to a right standing with God, they went the opposite direction, looking like they sought to destroy any hope for a right standing with God by not caring whatsoever.

Yet, Paul says that the Gentiles attained righteousness. This Greek word for “attain” is also an athletic term within running. So, Paul is saying that they didn’t enter the race. They went the opposite direction and yet they attained righteousness. Wait a second! You can’t attain to righteousness if you disqualified yourself for it, right?

Let’s go back to the Ironman illustration. The day of Kendra’s race was a Sunday. It was the day many of us wrote prayers on the floor of this auditorium. Immediately following that service, Tracy got in our van and drove down to Louisville to make it to the race and celebrate her victory at the finish line. That finish line was amazing. There was a huge crowd on either side of the red carpet at the finish line. There were two long walls that came up to our chest, but as each person was running towards the finish, we would all bang on the boards and yell in excitement for the people. Then, the announcer would call the person’s name and say, “You are an Ironman!”

But what if, everyone in the race was disqualified and the announcer started calling out names of people who were sitting in restaurants nearby? What if, while I was in the restaurant, I heard, “Timothy Durey, you are an Ironman!” And with Kendra, they said, “I’m sorry. You’re disqualified because you entered the race.”

Hold on a second, that’s ridiculous! I’m not an Ironman. She’s the Ironman. She worked. She entered the race. I just came to cheer her on and then I also enjoyed some food, sat in a restaurant, stood on the sidelines, cheered others in the race at times.

Now, think about how the Jews could think about Gentiles being granted the status of being beloved. The Gentiles didn’t have all the gifts and blessings. They also didn’t even think they needed to be made right with God. They weren’t raised in worshipping God. And yet, you’re saying, they attain and we don’t?! To that, Paul says, “yes.” And, if that sounds unfair, Paul says that the reason why they were given a right standing with God is because they had faith.

Change the running illustration a bit. They thought the Law called them to enter a rat race of running to attain to a standard of morality. They thought they could attain to God’s standard, but as Paul already said in Romans 2, God’s kindnesses was meant to lead them to turn from their own sin and to turn to him. The Law wasn’t meant to lead them to try harder to attain God’s love.

So, what many Jewish people did was to create a spiritual Ironman. God didn’t do this. They did! Then, some of them created rules around rules in order to keep the rules. The apostle Paul even was one of them at one point in time. In Philippians, he talks about being a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was well-trained. He had all the credentials any Jew would want. Yet then he says, “<sup>7</sup> But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

While the Jews made a race out of the Law, even entering that race was to cause everyone to realize God’s standard is too great. His holiness is so wonderful that there’s no way we could make it to any type of finish line. We fail because none of us can attain to God’s righteousness – for one, we’ve already sinned. And two, even if we did all we had to, we still just did what we were supposed to do.

---

<sup>7</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 3:7.

As Paul has been saying through the book of Romans, the Law was intended to humble us and then to look to God's mercy in Jesus as our only hope for salvation. Jesus, being the God-Man, possesses the righteousness of God. And Jesus, through his sacrifice on the cross, took the punishment our sins deserved and then gives *his* righteousness to all who trust him.

For God's mysterious sovereign purposes then, Paul says that many Gentiles have received this message. While some Gentiles try harder to be moral than others. They weren't in the Jewish religious system. Instead, as Paul said in Romans 2, they have their consciences excusing or accusing them, and their hearts have been opened to trusting Jesus. They've seen that they couldn't be good enough. They've seen they need a Savior. And they've come to follow Jesus.

Ventura, many of you in this room are a testament to this truth. Some of you came to faith in Jesus at a young age. Others of you as adults. Some of you have stories of great pain in coming to faith in Christ. Others of you were laying in bed while your parents were tucking you in. But with all of us, God opened our eyes to see that Jesus is our only hope for rescue from God's just punishment towards our sin. Jesus is our only hope to reconcile us to God.

**We saw that we didn't have to run a race with precision in order to get God to accept us and make us righteous. Instead, we needed to run to Christ.** And, this has been Paul's argument throughout Romans. Even utilizing the Old Testament over and over again, Paul's shown us that it's always been through faith that God has rescued people. And, when I say this, I want to make sure people don't then go, "Ok, well how good is my faith. How strong?" No! Faith looks to Jesus. Faith doesn't keep evaluating itself to make sure it's good enough! That defeats the purpose. Faith is looking to, trusting in, depending on Jesus. And, even in the weakness of faith, that faith cries out "help my unbelief." So, the Gentiles attain a right standing through faith and thus, they're embracing Jesus.

Faith magnifies Jesus – not us. Therefore, through faith, people are given righteousness because God is magnified as the one who saves. Now, what about the Jewish people?

## **2. Many Jews pursue a right standing through striving after the Law – rejecting Jesus (vv. 31-33).**

Let's read verses 31-32 first: <sup>31</sup> but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. <sup>32</sup> Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.<sup>8</sup>

In these verses, we again have running terms. We see the word "pursue" again. So, here we have the Israelites pursuing a law that would lead to righteousness, but didn't succeed in reaching that law. What does that even mean? It sounds like Paul is saying that the Law could make people righteous. Is that what he means? If they had just tried hard enough, they would have made it through the finish line, and they would have heard, "You are a Righteous One?" No. That's not what he's saying.

So, what is it? Does the Law lead us to a right relationship with God? You know, in one clear sense, no. But, in another sense, yes. The Old Testament saints will talk about how sin damages their relationship with God. Sin is unrighteousness. To harbor sin in our lives is to hold on to unrighteousness. So, yes, in one sense, the law does lead to righteousness in behavior.

---

<sup>8</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:31–32.

In these two verses, Paul makes clear that the Law isn't bad. Don't call someone legalistic simply because they want to obey God's rules. It's a *good* thing for someone to want to obey! Jesus said that if we love him, we will keep his commandments. But, we can keep the commandments in one sense and not be righteous. Or, we can keep the commandments in another sense and be obedient.

This might help us to understand Paul a little better here because in these verses, Paul is not putting down the Law. He's putting down *how* the Jews related to the Law. In verse 32, Paul says they pursued after the righteousness of the law as though it were dependent on their works. Now, some of you here might be thinking, "Well, of course you'd pursue the righteousness of the Law, depending on your works. What other way is there?"

I'm glad you asked. In Jesus' sermon on the mount, he said, **Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**<sup>9</sup> Jesus is the end of the Law. He is the fulfillment of the Law. The righteousness of the Law is Jesus. The reality is that the Law of God reveals the character of God – thus revealing Jesus himself. But what the Jews did is they tried to get the righteousness by depending on their own behavior and works.

**[Move to next slide point #2]**

If you depend on yourself, you make yourself your own Savior. God is no longer the Savior. Recently, I was made aware of a conversation/debate called "Ask a Jew/Ask a Gentile." The conversation was between a prominent American pastor named Alastair Begg and a prominent political conservative and practicing Jew, Dennis Prager. In the course of the interview, Prager stated that he "pleads guilty to the belief that God carries a scorecard for our ethical behavior." Now, God doesn't have a perfect standard for us, but if we're basically moral then we're all going to get to Heaven.

Alastair Begg responded by focusing on Jesus, saying that what Jesus says must matter most to us. If Jesus is who he said he is and did what was claimed, then we must take him at what he said. In the midst of the conversation, Prager said something like, "I have no problem with you saying that because that's your faith." He then said that he has faith, too. He believes Moses walked through the Red Sea, but that's his faith. He can't prove it. Begg responded to say, "I hope you don't mean that your faith creates the Exodus. . . . I believe there was an actual Exodus. . . . So that faith in faith is only faith in faith. The question is if there's a basis of this faith. Are we dealing with real history with real people? If so, we have a foundation on which we make our statements." At some point in this discussion, Prager revealed somewhat of his disagreement with this. He said that if our faith can actually be founded on these types of details then the Jews were fools and you should punish them because they killed the Messiah.

In this interview, I can see the two ideas Paul raises in this text. First, works are essentially all that matter. Second, trusting Jesus doesn't matter. Therefore, who's the Savior? They are. This reminds me of the story of the two men who enter the temple. One man comes in thanking God that he's not like the other sinful person in the temple. He thanks God he doesn't do all sorts of things – which, in one sense is good. Being a good person is still nice and neighborly. Obedience isn't bad. But it's how he's obeying. He's not obeying out of absolute dependence on the Savior. Yet, the man who beats his chest and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," walks away justified. To be justified means he's declared righteous by God. That's the point of the Law. The Law points to a righteousness we can't attain. It points us to our need to depend on Jesus, the Messiah.

---

<sup>9</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:17.

So, Paul says they pursue the righteousness by their own works instead of by faith. Even in the Old Testament, Paul goes back to Abraham to show how faith is what mattered. Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. That's how salvation will always come to people.

What about you? Do you live as though your actions give you a right standing with God? Let's go back to the race illustration. Imagine there's an impossible race. There's no hope of finishing – or even come close to finishing. Many people who have entered have died not even halfway through. You know this and you simply fall down and say, "I can't." But you know of One who has completed it: Jesus. You cry out to him because he's clearly greater than all. And Jesus gives you his medal.

This, in a small way, show the beauty of us being reconciled with God and being declared righteous. It doesn't matter how horribly you've messed up, how great your sins are – don't try to make God happier with you by simply doing actions that you think will make him satisfied with you. NO! That does not recognize the greatness of God's holiness! Instead, cry out to him. Call to Jesus for rescue and you will find that he's the sufficient Savior. Everyone who calls on him will be given a right standing with God. AND, get this, and, you will then be able to grow in obedience in a way God intends.

**The Jews, and many others, obey to get God's favor, but God gives people his favor and then his children will want to obey.** But this idea seems to have angered many Jews, according to Paul's statement here. Paul moves on in the end of verse 32 and into 33 by saying, "They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,<sup>33</sup> as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."<sup>10</sup>

The Jews were running a race to attain to the prize of righteousness, but they were trusting their own running to get them there. They thought their works were sufficient to get to it. But then, Jesus showed up and they've stumbled over him. Some stumbling in races, you can get back up and move forward, but it seems that Paul says that **to stumble over Christ not only makes you disqualified in your work-based race, but completely keeps you from a right standing with God forever.**

Why do I say *forever*? The words "stumble" and "offense" don't simply mean that people stumble, get back up and then get angry at him. The word for "offense" can actually be translated "scandalized." What does that mean? Well, in poetry, we should look at both lines to see that Isaiah was creating a contrast. The next line talking about not being put to shame is speaking of no shame in judgment. Therefore, the words "stumble" and "offense" refer to the judgment. People will either depend on Jesus or they will be disqualified. And no amount of complaining or argument will cause God, the Judge, to change the rules. God has always called people to come to him through faith. And, this is the only way where there's hope. We can't save ourselves. Only God can!

But there's another point I want to make clear. To stumble over Jesus means that you have to come into contact with him. The Jewish people did come into contact with Jesus – and many Jews today still come into contact with Jesus, deciphering through why they will not believe on Jesus. In the context of the first century, the Jews were deliberately rejecting Jesus. Like Paul once did, they defied the message of Jesus and some (if not many) wanted it destroyed. Today, I know of Jews who have told stories of how they really didn't learn much about Jesus or think much about him before coming to faith in Jesus. While there are others, like Dennis Prager who has had *many* conversations with Christians and still denies.

---

<sup>10</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:32–33.

But what does Paul say is the essential reason for the denial? Because they depend on their works. Whether or not they hear more or less about Jesus, they're going to generally seek a righteousness by works – thus rejecting even the notion of Jesus and his salvation by grace. Therefore, they are self-righteous, not God-righteous. Jesus' message is one that denies self-righteousness. So, in Zion, God laid a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense.

As we continue in the book of Romans, I hope you see the beauty of God's kindness in Christ. And, even as we study about Jews and Gentiles, I do want to say that I hope you don't look down on the Jews because of this or elevate the Gentiles. That's not the point of Paul's statements here. Next week, Paul will talk about how his prayer is that all may be saved and that there are Jews who are Christians! But, the emphasis is on God's sovereign plan and on God's great glory displayed in judgment and mercy.

While there probably are not Jews here in this gathering this morning, I do have a question for you: how do you relate to God? Do you say you're basically good and he should be good with that or do you recognize you fall short of God's glory, you need God and only Jesus can give you a right standing with God, which will then lead to love and obedience? I pray that you won't make it to the judgment and experience eternal judgment against you.

Paul, in quoting Isaiah, says, "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."<sup>11</sup> Whoever believes in Jesus will not be put to shame. This idea of shame should not be understood psychologically – like saying you won't feel feelings of shame ever. It means that you will not be disappointed in the end. Jesus will follow through with his promise. You will enter into eternal life if you believe in him!

But, I must qualify what believe in means. In the New Testament, the authors essentially made up this phrase. It's, as far as I know, nowhere found in secular Greek literature. It means to take your trust outside of yourself and then to place your dependence in Jesus. So, when people in our modern days say, "Just believe in yourself," that's actually the idea brought up in the New Testament, except the authors say, "NO! Believe in Jesus." Place yourself at Jesus – entrusting yourself to him as your life, the Truth and the way to reconciliation with God. Salvation is by Jesus alone, not your effort.

And don't say, "But I do this," or "But this is what happened to me." When you do that, you're going to God saying that you don't need Jesus, you don't need his righteousness. It's like saying, "No" to God when he has the greatest gift of all – himself! It also denies Jesus and his superior worth. Only Jesus saves – and in Jesus we will *never* be put to shame. We will never be disappointed. **Salvation is through Jesus alone, not by our effort. Will you run in your own strength? Or, will you run to Jesus?**

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Keller, Timothy. *Romans 1-7 For You*. The Good Book Company North America. 2016.
2. Moo, Douglas. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996.
3. Schreiner, Thomas. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 1998.

---

<sup>11</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:33.