

A Sermon by  
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Chinese Christian Church  
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# Israel and Unbelief

## ROMANS 10:1-21

Last week, we reviewed the great truths of the gospel that are recorded in ROMANS 1-8 and then we used ROMANS 9 to reflect upon the acts of God in Israel's history. And, basically, the conclusion that I came to is that the acts of God are governed by the great truths found in the gospel and not by man's choices or man's laws or man's traditions. Without exception, the principles of grace and wrath and belief that were laid down before the foundation of the world will always trump the conclusions that people come to and the decisions that people make.

This does not mean that man is a puppet with no freedom to choose between right and wrong. If men were puppets with no freedom to make choices, then the words spoken by God to the nation of Israel in DEUTERONOMY 30:19 would make no sense at all. That verse of scripture records God saying to His people, "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live..."

When it comes to making moral decisions, God will not choose for us. He will set the truth before us and allow us to decide whether or not we want to embrace the truth. But, when it comes to determining how much truth will be revealed to us, God does make that choice for us.

The nation of Israel was chosen by God to receive special revelation of truth and also to be His instrument for communicating truth to other people. They were chosen to be the caretakers of the Oracles of God. And, they were also chosen by God to provide the family line that would lead up to the Messiah. From the time of Abraham up to the time when Jesus was born, nothing that Israel did, good or bad, would alter God's choice. God's choice to bless a person or a nation by revealing special truth has no relationship with the choices that person or that nation makes.

Each one of us in this auditorium has been chosen by God to receive the special revelation that is recorded in the Bible. In that sense, we are blessed. Many people in this world have never even seen a Bible or attended a Sunday School class or church service of any kind. God has chosen us to receive His blessing of truth. The fact that we are chosen by God to receive this blessing has nothing to do with our belief or our behavior. It has everything to do with factors beyond our control, factors such as who are parents and friends are and where and when we were born. Perhaps by thinking this way, you may be better able to understand the principle of God's choosing the nation of Israel to receive the special blessing of revelation. When it comes to whether or not a person receives special revelation, God's choosing has nothing to do with man's choosing.

But when it comes to whether or not a certain person enters into the kingdom of God—when it comes to whether or not a person is made righteous through the blood of Jesus Christ—there is a relationship between God's choosing and man's choosing. It is absolutely ridiculous to say that God would choose a person to go to heaven who during every moment of his life, right up to the time of his death, consistently chose to reject the truth that had been revealed to him. And, it would be just as ludicrous to say that a person who chooses to believe the truth revealed to him will be chosen by God to go to

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hell.

The reason why only a remnant of Abraham's offspring would actually enter into the kingdom of God is because they chose to believe the truth that had been revealed to them while the rest of Israel decided not to believe.

Today, in ROMANS chapter 10, we are going to take a close look at the nature of unbelief in the nation of Israel, which is also the nature of unbelief as it appears with any person or group of people.

ROMANS 9 began with the Apostle Paul expressing great concern for a nation that was facing certain judgment for her rejection of truth. Chapter 10 begins with the same expression of concern. Paul knew that Israel's only hope was for her to trust in God's way of salvation and not her own.

What follows is a description of Israel's unbelief. In verses 2-3 we can see that two things characterized this nation's unbelief. First of all there was a tremendous amount of activity, but the activity was not based on truth-principles. It was zeal without knowledge. The Apostle Paul knew well about this zeal. He had been part of the zeal when he once worked hard to persecute the church. He had also been the recipient of the zeal when others persecuted him, and he had lash marks on his body to prove it.

Verse 3 reveals the driving force behind the zeal. The driving force is an attempt to become righteous in one's own strength. It is an attempt at trusting in temple ritual and trusting in one's own ability to obey the law to become righteous. It is unbelief, because God's way to become righteous had been revealed to them and they had rejected God's way. God only provides one way for a person to become righteous, and that is through the blood of Jesus Christ. There simply is no other way for God's wrath to be appeased.

But, most of Israel had rejected God's way. The truth about Christ had been presented to them, and they had rejected the truth. The definition of unbelief is to reject truth and that is what Israel had done.

ROMANS 10:4 says that Christ is the end of the law. For the people of Israel, the law was supposed to be like a schoolmaster that would lead them to the Messiah. It was supposed to teach them that, regardless of how hard they tried, it was impossible for them to obey the law. And, the teaching of Moses should have made it clear to them that a person cannot be righteous unless that person lives by the law 100% of the time. What ROMANS 10:5 is trying to say is really the same truth that is recorded in JAMES 2:10: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

God revealed truth to the people of Israel through the law and the prophets, but they rejected the truth. That is unbelief. Belief that leads to righteousness does not question the Word of God. Unbelief does question God's Word. ROMANS 10:6-8 is a quote from DEUTERONOMY 30:11-14. The main point of the DEUTERONOMY passage is that the truth revealed to us by God is not that difficult to understand. The truth that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead should not be that difficult for the Jewish person to accept. People are not expressing faith when they say, "I refuse to believe that Christ rose from the dead unless I can climb into the heavenlies and actually see Him sitting on the right hand of God!" And people are not expressing faith when they say, "I will not believe that Christ rose from the dead until I search the realms of the dead and determine for myself that He is not there!" Christ is not just a human being who can be brought down from heaven or brought up from the land of the dead to prove that He is alive. The person who says, "I won't believe what the Bible says about Jesus until I see it with my own eyes is revealing His unbelief in the Word of God.

All the essential truth needed for a person to exercise saving faith is present. There is enough historical data to convince a reasonable person that Christ rose from the dead. Denying that Christ rose from the dead is like denying that man has landed on the moon. You have to ignore the facts.

The prophets had proclaimed the truth about the Messiah. Both the law and the temple ritual pointed to the truth about the Messiah. And now, the apostle Paul and others had proclaimed the gospel truth about the Messiah. Back in those days, they didn't have film and cameras to record what happened. But, hundreds of people saw with their own eyes and gave credible testimony. All people needed now to be saved was to confess the truth that was so near to them and had been revealed so clearly to them. This is basically what ROMANS 10:6-8 is saying.

The principles that determine whether or not a person will become righteous and go to heaven are the same for everyone, Jew or Gentile. One must believe in the truth about God that has been revealed to him. Perhaps the most distinguishing factor about saving faith is that it will always produce a cry for help on the part of the person who believes. Some people only need to know a little bit about God before they cry out for help. Others need to know a great deal about God before they will cry out for help. But, everyone who believes unto salvation will cry out for help. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." That's a quote from the Old Testament (JOEL 2:32). The prophet recorded those words long before anyone had heard the name of Jesus. So the truth about calling out to God for help as being an essential element of saving faith was true even before people knew the name of Jesus.

The sequence of questions recorded in ROMANS 10:14-15 was never meant to prove that a person actually has to hear the name of Jesus in order to be saved. The key to understanding this sequence of questions is to remember that faith involves calling out for help. So what is the logic? It is this: No one will call for help if he does not believe in the Helper. Israel's unbelief prevented her from calling out to God for help. Israel did not think she needed help, because she was locked into the false notion that she could attain righteousness on her own. How can the people of Israel call on the one they have not believed in? They can't call and they won't call, because they don't think they have a need to call.

The second question in the sequence is "How can the people of Israel believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" The obvious answer is that a person or group of people cannot believe in truth that has not been revealed to them. That is why Paul's mission to the Gentiles was so important.

But, the people of Israel had heard, so they had no excuse for their unbelief. Does that mean that a person who has never heard the name of Jesus does have an excuse and will not be condemned? Of course he will be condemned, but he will not be condemned because he has never heard the name of Jesus; rather, he will be condemned because he has rejected the truth that has been revealed to him, whatever that truth may be. Jesus is not the cause for people going to hell. He is the solution. In fact, Jesus is the only solution. That is why it is so important to proclaim the good news about Jesus to other people. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

The sad thing about Israel is that the messengers had arrived and they had proclaimed the good news; however, the messengers and the message were rejected. The people of Israel did not believe in the Helper, because they did not think they needed help. In ROMANS 10:16 the apostle Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was one of God's messengers sent to proclaim the news about the Messiah. Isaiah used detail to explain the fact that the Messiah was to come as a suffering servant, One who would be despised and forsaken of men. But even back then no one would believe Isaiah's message, because they were trying to depend on politics and religion and military might to bring about the kingdom of God. Unless the Messiah fit into their own theories of salvation, they would not believe. They were relying on themselves, so they rejected God's solution. They couldn't believe in the Helper.

At what point does faith in God become saving faith? How much truth about God does a certain person have to believe before that person can be saved? This is an impossible question to answer. But, it seems clear enough that faith becomes saving faith when the believer hears the message in such a way that the message becomes like a death sentence that has been revoked. Are you aware of the fact that you were once sentenced to die and go to hell? For those of you who made decisions to believe as adults, you

should still remember what it is like to live under such a death penalty. And for those of you who have truly believed unto salvation, you should know the feeling of having that penalty revoked. How can a person who has truly believed in Jesus not have this kind of experience? The message of the gospel is the message that there is a Messiah who has become a propitiation for us. In other words, He has used His own life to revoke the death penalty and appease God's wrath for those who believe.

And, had the people of Israel heard the gospel message? Of course they had. But, they did not listen. The problem with Israel was not a lack of revelation. It was a lack of belief.

In ROMANS 10:19, the apostle Paul quoted from DEUTERONOMY 32. In that passage of scripture, Israel was being condemned because she was not listening to God's voice. So, God prophesied what Israel's ultimate judgement would be. God had chosen that Israel be a caretaker of the Oracles of God up until the time of the Messiah. But, after the Messiah came, that blessing would be taken away from them and given to people who would believe. And, most of those people would be Gentiles. Just hearing this judgment pronounced would make Israel upset. And, seeing the judgment carried out would make them piping mad.

But, Israel's anger could not change God's mind. There are limitations to God's mercy and patience. He will only hold out His hands for so long. God's patience ran out for the political nation of Israel. God kept the covenant He made with Abraham, but the political and ethnic nation of Israel broke her part of the agreement. And, her disobedience was stubborn.

Some people still have a magical and mystical notion about the political and religious nation of Israel. But, the only thing that the modern political and religious nation has left in terms of special privilege is the privilege of being chosen by God as a sign for the fulfilling of future prophesy. They no longer have any ethnic purity to speak of, so the hope of a future Messiah (different from Jesus) appearing who is a direct descendant of Abraham is almost impossible to fathom. They have lost their privilege to be caretakers of God's Word. That privilege has been given over to the true Israel. They have even lost their temple rituals. The only thing they have left is the Mosaic law and the teachings of the prophets, which should lead them to believe in the Messiah that has already come.

But, ROMANS 10 is not about the modern-day Jew. It is about the unbelief of a nation that existed 2,000 years ago, and it is about the unbelief of everyone who has received a clear revelation of truth. These lessons from Israel's history need to serve as a wake-up call for all of us who continue to be stubborn in our unbelief and insist on trusting in our own strength and intelligence to achieve righteousness.