



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 9: 24-33

Romans

“Finding without Seeking”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We’re going to look at Romans 9 again and finish the chapter this morning. I think I mentioned – I did mention some weeks ago that this chapter had a major impact on me when I was young a long time ago, thirty years ago or so when I was just out of high school reading the bible really for the first time with real earnestness. And I read through Romans 9 one night and I was deeply impressed by the sovereignty of God and you cannot read this with your eyes open and not be impressed by God’s absolute sovereignty. We come to the end of that and we learn not only of God’s sovereignty but Paul’s strong convictions about man’s responsibility.

The text is Romans 9:24-33, but let’s begin with verse 23. “And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, ‘I will call those who were not my people, ‘My people.’ And her who was not beloved, ‘Beloved.’ And it shall be in that place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they shall be called sons of the Living God.’

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.’ And just as Isaiah foretold, ‘Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah.’ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did

not not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’” May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, it is a great privilege to come to this place, to be here this morning. Sometimes we come because it’s our routine, but we have just experienced a great blessing and that is the reading of your word because we have read what is unique in all the world. The world is filled with books, it’s filled with words, it’s filled with ideas, but this book is unique. This passage of scripture is unique because it is God-breathed. It is your word. It’s a blessing to read it and it is an added blessing to consider its meaning and be taught the truth of this text. That is a supernatural work, Father.

Men can stand before others and speak and explain a text and hopefully do a good job and yet for that to be successful, for teaching to really occur, for information to be imparted, the spirit of God must be in it. He must be the teacher and so we look to you to bless us with His ministry this morning. May He minister within us and may He open hearts to receive the ministry that’s given. We look to you to bless us, Father, to teach us these things, to give us a conviction of the truth of them, to appreciate the grace that has brought us into your family and given us life and to give us the understanding that we, though the products of your sovereign grace are nevertheless responsible individuals to respond to the promises of your word. So help us to understand that and help us to respond. Enable us to do that.

Bless us this morning. Spiritually build us up in the faith and we pray for ourselves in the material, physical concerns of life, we have those. We pray that you’d bless, bless those who are sick, give them healing. Give those who are discouraged from the difficulties of life, from the pressures of work or from the lack of employment or from financial difficulties, whatever the situation may be, the pressures of life weigh down upon us and they discourage us and sometimes they are so great that we can’t see beyond the circumstances, we can’t look to you. Raise our eyes to Christ and to the promises of your word, Father, and give encouragement in

the midst of difficulty. And then show your great strength and your hand of blessing and salvation in the midst of difficulty. Pray for those who are suffering in one way or another, physically or grieving over the loss of a loved one, give encouragement and comfort.

Bless our nation, we pray for our leaders, that you give them great wisdom as they persecute a war abroad, as they seek to protect and defend the nation here at home. We pray for our military, that you would protect the men and women who serve us and are protecting our land and that you would bless this nation. And we pray for prosperity, we pray for peace, for pray for these things. They're gifts from you. And yet, Father, more importantly, we pray for spiritual awakening within this land, that men and women would see that life is brief, material things of life are only here for a moment, we only enjoy them for a moment and then we enter eternity. Turn people's minds to what's really important and may we, as your servants, be used to that end.

Prepare us for that this morning and do so this evening as we come back to this place to celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember His first coming and what He did for us. May it be a meeting that is blessed of you, bless all who participate and pray that it would be an edifying time together. May that be true for us now. Bless our final hymn and prepare our hearts for our study together and teach us and instruct us and build us up in the faith. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] There are few things that are more disappointing than laboring hard for something and never obtaining it. And what's even worse is when that labor contributes to the failure. A student studies diligently for an exam only to find out that he studied the wrong material. All his effort, all his energy was for nothing and it consumed his time. He had the right goal, he pursued the wrong path. That was the story of Israel who worked hard for salvation but didn't achieve it.

Paul writes in Romans 9:31, "Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law." The irony is the gentiles who didn't pursue salvation obtained it. Now all of this was predicted, as Paul explains in the last part of Romans 9. In Romans 9, Paul is defending God's faithfulness to His word, the salvation of gentiles in great numbers and the obstinate unbelief of Jews caused concern that God's word failed. He made promises to save Israel, but most Jews were not being saved. Had God rejected His people? Had God broken His promise?

It's a question that is relevant to us because if God failed to keep His word to the Jews, we might wonder and wonder well if He will keep His promises to Christians. Paul's answer is that God did not break His word. He never promised to save all Jews, only those He chose for salvation and all of the elect will be saved. But the doctrine of election seems unfair to people and so anticipating that, in verses 14 through 23 Paul defends God's right to choose whomever He wills to choose.

God Himself declared that to be His sovereign right when He said to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Doesn't depend on man's effort, doesn't depend on his will or his work but on God alone who has mercy. Verse 16. Now in the final verses of the chapter, verses 24 through 33, Paul returns to his defense of God's faithfulness to His word. But here, he goes a step further to show that God's word and God's mercy extend beyond Israel.

The nature of God's mercy is seen not only in its sovereignty, that is in the fact that it is strictly solely according to His choice, His will alone, but it is also seen in its breadth, that it's in its width. It includes gentiles as well. Verse 24, he includes them among those described in verse 23 as, “Vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory. God called both Jews and of all people, the Gentiles.”

Now Paul's Jewish opponents might have seen gentile conversions as proof that Paul's message, his gospel was false since God's promises were for the Jews. But in the next verses Paul quotes some Old Testament scriptures to prove that God had always intended to call gentiles and that the call never included all Israel. Everything that was happening, Jewish unbelief, gentile faith was according to God's will as prophesied in scripture.

Verses 25 and 26, Paul quotes two passages from Hosea to prove God's purpose in saving gentiles, that that was predicted. Book of Hosea is the great love story of the Old Testament. It is all about God's compassion and mercy for the undeserving. God told the prophet to marry a woman who would be unfaithful in order to give a powerful illustration of His love for faithless Israel. Hosea's wife would leave him for other lovers but Hosea would continue to love her and care for her and ultimately draw her back to himself. And that's the story of God's relationship with Israel.

So Hosea married Gomer. She began to have children and with the birth of each child, God instructed Hosea to give each one of them a symbolic name. Two of them were named Lo-ruhamah which means not pitied and Lo-ammi which means not my people because Israel was guilty of idolatry and therefore, they did not behave like His people and were not treated like His people. And because they had done that, they would to be judged and not to be pitied.

Hosea’s ministry occurred in the north and there the ten tribes had violated the covenant, they’d broken God’s covenant, they had become like the gentiles. They were living like the gentiles, worshipping the gods of the gentiles and so they would be made to live among the gentiles. Would be defeated and disbursed among the nations. But in Hosea 2:23, God gives the promise of restoration, that’s what Paul quotes in Romans 9:25 as he says also in Hosea, “I will call those who were not my people, ‘My people.’ And her who was not beloved, ‘Beloved.’”

In verse 26 he then quotes Hosea 1:10 which makes the same point, “And it shall be in that place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they shall be called sons of the Living God.” Though the nation had been cut off from God, it would be restored to Him just as Hosea restored his unfaithful wife to a loving relationship with himself. That was God’s promise to Israel.

But Paul interpreted these prophecies as applied to the gentiles because God’s calling of the gentiles works on the same principle as will his restoration of Israel. If Jews were to be cut off from God in judgment and could once again be called back to Him as His people, then God could call gentiles who were naturally not His people His people. That’s how Paul reasoned and he was witnessing that very thing in his ministry with great numbers of gentiles being saved who had never been called the people of God. They had lived in darkness, they had been separated from God’s people and from the revelation that God had given to Israel. They were heathens who were now called sons of the living God.

They had known gods. They’d known false gods, the gods of the pagan pantheons or the god of their philosophy, maybe the god of Aristotle, the unmoved mover. But now they knew the truth God, the living God and they were His sons with all of the rights and the privileges of God’s family. And so Paul made the application of the prophecy to them. Those who truly were not God’s people were being called His people. And that was the mercy of God.

But what about those who had been called the sons of God, those of Israel? Most of the Jews of Paul’s day did not believe the gospel. What did the scriptures say about that? These natural sons of God, these who had been blessed with the adoption as son as Paul had said at the beginning of the chapter. Well, he quotes in verses 27 and 28, quotes from Isaiah who predicted Israel’s failure and the exclusion of all but a small number. And this answers the Jewish objection that if Jesus were really the Christ, the Jewish people would have accepted Him. The fact that they didn’t believe is evidence that Jesus wasn’t the Christ, well, as Paul points out, the scriptures show that the majority of Israel has always been in unbelief.

Verse 27, “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will exalted; for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.’” Paul is quoting Isaiah 10:22-23 where Isaiah prophesied judgment on the nation from Assyria in spite of Israel’s large numbers, though they be like the sand of the sea, this vast number of people. It is only the remnant that will be saved. The rest will be swept away in a storm of judgment that will come as Isaiah says, “Thoroughly and quickly,” which proves Paul’s point that God never promised to save every physical Israelite.

God’s promises have always been for the remnant, for the elect, for those God chose for salvation. Paul gives a second quote from Isaiah in verse 29. It is from Isaiah 1:9 and again, it is about judgment and mercy. “Just as Isaiah foretold, ‘Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah.’” Nobody survived the destruction of those cities other than Lot and his daughters, but the native citizens of the cities of the plain were all destroyed. They were sinful cities and their judgment was deserved, and as you read through the prophets of the Old Testament, oftentimes they compare Israel to Sodom and Gomorrah saying you’re no different from them.

And so Israel’s judgment was deserved. And it is only the sovereign grace of God that left a remnant, it’s only because of that that some were saved. Otherwise the entire nation would have been completely wiped out. But God is the Lord Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, meaning He’s the Lord of the Armies. He controls the powers of the universe and He determines the course of history and ensures that His chosen ones will be preserved and saved. That is the only reason we are saved.

So the doctrine of election, far from being harsh or unfair as it is often accused of being, it's just the opposite. Apart from it, no one would be saved. Apart from election, apart from vessels prepared beforehand for mercy, all would perish. All would be fitted for destruction. That's what we deserve. Now the Jews of Paul's day didn't understand that. They felt secure because they were descendants of Abraham, but it's clear from their prophets, it's clear from their history that that no grounds for security, for confidence or for compliancy. It is spiritual Israel, the Israel within Israel, God's elect, that will be saved. And that is a remnant.

So the knowledge of that should have shaken an individual from a sense of compliancy and security because of the physical benefits that he or she had and to realize, no, that does not guarantee anything. And yet at the same time, this remnant is also a sign of hope for the future for Israel. God had a posterity which is literally a seed. And this was God's assurance that He would be faithful to His people. He would leave a posterity, He would leave a seed from which the nation would grow. And that promise, that blessing anticipates the promise of chapter 11 that all Israel will be saved. God is not finished with the Jewish people.

In the present, there is a remnant, a remnant accorded to grace. In the future, the nation as a whole will return to the Lord. They will trust in Christ. And it's in this way that Paul reconciles the promises of God to Israel with the small number of salvation among the Jews in the present. God is not finished with His people. And He is presently faithful to them. Now the lessons of this are important for us. And the first lesson is that God's word is true. It can be trusted.

It is people who don't read scripture, who don't believe the scripture that they read who fail. Not God's word. If the Jews had only read their prophets carefully, they might have learned that Jewish unbelief and gentile salvation was according to God's word and according to God's will. But people fail to do that. The Jews fail to do that. And people today fail to do that. As James Boice pointed out in his commentary on this text, that is true of professing Christians as well. He wrote, "You know what God says about following Him, for example, about seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness and knowing that all of these things, all of the things of life, the food we eat, the clothing we wear and even the nicer things of life, not just the basics but everything from life, as God says, will be given to you. Everything that you need is going to be supplied to you if you seek first the kingdom of God, the word

of God states that. But,” he writes, “you do not do that. You put other things first, leaving God until last, if indeed he gets that position. You do not think often of Him, you do not study His word, you do not spend time with other Christians, then you are surprised when life doesn’t go well for you and you run into difficulties. Why should you be surprised? God does not lie and He has told you in advance how the Christian life is to be lived and what will happen if you neglect Him. God declares, ‘Those who honor me, I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.’”

So there’s an important lesson in this for us. What applied to Israel in principle about reading and studying and learning and believing in the word of God applies to us as well. We’re to study God’s word, we’re to trust it, we’re to heed its warnings and we’re to believe its promises. Its promises are encouraging, its promises are great and we’re to believe them.

The second lesson is that the presumptuous will be swept away. Not everyone will be saved. Universalism is untrue. The Jews thought that they were okay simply because they were Jews. All would go well with them because of who they were, and there are people, perhaps people in here this morning who think very much like that, who think that because they are here, they’re okay. Or because they come to church regularly or belong to a Christian family, they are okay. Those are great blessings, but salvation has nothing to do with biology or hereditary or associations in formal memberships.

It is presumptuous, it is foolish for people to think that because they are Americans or because they go to church or because they had been baptized that they’re saved. It is presumptuous to think that because God is love and He certainly is, that God is not just and that God will not judge. He is just. Read through the scriptures, He’s a consuming. It is a terrifying thing to fall under the hands of the living God. And those who do not understand that, those who fail to see their sin and their need of the savior will fall into His hands and they will be judged.

The scripture’s plain. It’s clear from the bible. So we need to know the bible, we need to know God’s word, we need to study it, we need to believe it. It is true. It never fails; it can be trusted. What failed is not God’s word, that’s what Paul is saying in this text. It’s not God’s word, it’s Israel who failed because they failed to pay attention to the scriptures that were given to them. Now failure implies responsibility. And that is what Paul comes to in the last verses of the chapter, a

chapter that lays great stress on God’s absolute sovereignty; that should be clear. This is about a God who is absolutely sovereign.

Robert Haldane made a comment that’s worth noting. He is a Scot who lived 150, 200 years ago and wrote a significant influential commentary on the Book of Romans that is still used and read widely today. But he wrote about this chapter, “Can anything be more palpably obvious than the meaning of the apostle? Is there any chapter in the bible more plain its grammatical meaning? The reason people find Romans 9 hard to understand,” he said, and he was in this commentary speaking of his contemporaries who profess to believe in this chapter but didn’t preach it, avoided it, and so he asked this question, “Can anything be more obvious? The problem here in Romans 9 is not understanding the meaning of the words and what Paul is saying. The reason it’s hard to understand,” he said, “is because of the innate aversion of the mind to its humbling truths.”

Its truths are humbling. Paul is clear, very clear in this chapter. God is sovereign in salvation. It’s not of him who wills or him or runs but God who has mercy. But divine sovereignty and salvation and judgment does not eliminate human responsibility and neither are the two incompatible with each other. God is sovereign, but man is responsible and we must stress that, we must not stress sovereignty to the exclusion of responsibility. Paul does not do that. Paul, in verses 30 through 33, explains the responsibility that people have and explains that Israel bears full responsibility for not receiving the salvation that was promised.

He begins with a question, “What shall we say then? What are we to make of Israel’s unbelief, especially in light of gentile salvation?” Because it seems very puzzling. Paul said at the very beginning of the book that the gospel was for the Jew first. These promises were given to the Jews. So how is it that they’re not coming, they’re not believing but gentiles are? It seems as though everything’s been turned upside down. So it seems puzzling because as Paul explains, the gentiles won the prize without running the race, without pursuing. They found what they were not seeking. God’s righteousness, which is by faith while Israel pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive at that law. Why?

The Jews were the ones who expected to obtain the righteousness of God. They made great effort. Paul will speak about their zeal, he gives them credit for that. They pursued it by seeking to keep the law. The gentiles didn’t. In fact, go back to

chapter 1 where Paul explained the condition among the gentiles, their apostasy and we read how they rejected God to worship the creature rather than the creator. Yet they are the ones, Paul says, who obtained righteousness. The reason is because that righteousness is not in ourselves and it cannot be found in ourselves and it cannot be worked out in ourselves. It is in Christ and it is obtained by faith not by works. Salvation is a gift.

What Israel sought was salvation that could be earned, a righteousness of their own making, self-righteousness by works. But the law could never provide that. It was never given for that end. The law was given not to give righteousness but to expose the lack of righteousness, to show us that we cannot produce the perfect that it demands and we cannot achieve the salvation that we seek. But the Jews refused to see that. And so Paul explains that they didn't arrive because they did not pursue it by faith but as though it were by works. Took the wrong path like that student who studied the wrong material for the exam. They sought salvation in the wrong way. All of us do that until God shows us our error, shows us the way and leads us in it.

That's the reason the gentiles found what they were not seeking because God is a seeking God who seeks and finds the lost. He takes the initiative in salvation. Once again, it goes back to God's distinguishing grace, His electing grace, His electing love. Well then, could that be an excuse for Israel's unbelief? After all, if God elects some and passes by others, those passed by can't be blamed for their failure to believe, can they?

That's often the objection to the doctrine of election. In fact, it's the very objection that was raised in verse 19 in regard to Pharaoh, how can he be faulted? He only did what God willed for him to do. Paul doesn't yield to that objection. He answers no to it, God doesn't condemn innocent people. All have sinned, none deserve God's grace. God is not obligated to show mercy to rebels. That He shows mercy to any is a great wonder.

In fact, He shows mercy to a multitude. But if it's dependent on God, if it's dependent on predestination, if all of that is true, then we are puppets. We don't have wills of our own. Condemnation under such circumstances is not just. And that too is an old objection. But it's one that's completely false. People do have wills and people are responsible, we are not puppets and the doctrines of God's sovereign grace do not eliminate human freedom.

The decisions that people make are made freely. God doesn't force people to receive or reject the truth. People act and choose according to their natures of their minds. But as a result of the fall, our entire being, body, mind and will, all of that has been affected by sin so that the bent of our nature is away from God and always bent toward choosing that which is contrary to God. That is what people will do inevitably because that's the nature of their mind. It's to do that.

And this is what the Lord said back in Genesis 8:21, I think I quoted that last week, but God said, “The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.” That's man. We are born in rebellion against God. That is our nature and so we will freely act according to our nature and act in rebellion. That doesn't mean that there's no such thing as human kindness. There is. People do good and heroic things for one another, but in regard to God, our hearts are not naturally inclined towards Him, they are bent against Him.

And we find that elsewhere, Romans 8:7, a text that I quote frequently but it applies directly to this very issue, the natural mind, the mind that is set on the flesh, the unsaved mind does not subject itself to the law of God. Now that is a statement of fact. That is an observation that Paul could make. Men do not do that. They do not want to do that. They don't do it. But then he gives the reason, for it is not even able to do so. The natural mind cannot do that. Now I don't know how Paul could say it any more plainly than that. Could take the statements of Haldane and apply it to that statement in Romans 8. How can it be put any more plain than that, that man cannot, cannot of himself do anything that pleases God? And that includes belief; that includes faith.

For anyone to do so, for anyone to subject himself to the law of God, to respond to the gospel of God, God must intervene and change that person's heart and in His mercy He does. But when He doesn't, when He leaves people in their natural condition, which they freely continue in, people don't object to God because He's leaving them in that condition, when they're left in that condition, they are responsible for what they do. Now we know that. We may not understand how these things work together, how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man fit together, and Paul doesn't solve that problem for us here, doesn't work out the issue completely. He doesn't explain these things, but it is clear that people are responsible.

People reject the gospel not because they are prevented from believing it, not because they are held back from doing something that they want to do, people reject the gospel not because it is confusing. People can understand what is meant when you say or I say you're a sinner and you're condemned by God and the only way of salvation is through Jesus Christ who died in your place. People can understand those words, they can understand the meaning of it. They don't reject it because it's confusing, they reject it because they don't like what they're hearing. They reject it because they don't want it and don't believe that it is true. They can understand the truth of it; they can't believe that it is true.

It is foolishness to them and so because it's foolishness to them, they freely refuse it. Israel rejected Christ freely. And at the end of verse 32 and in verse 33, Paul refers to this rejection and how it took place and he refers to the Lord as the stone of stumbling. “They stumbled over the stumbling stone,” verse 33, just as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.”

Israel missed Christ with all of the preparation that was given to it, centuries of preparation for His coming and yet with all of that preparation, with the law and the prophets, all of that, Israel didn't look for Him. He was foretold in scripture, but the nation focused on the requirements of the law rather than the person about whom the law was written. Israel was like a person walking down a path, looking down the length of it and tripping over a rock in that middle of that path because they failed to see it. They were looking at something else. And if we could carry out the analogy, tripping over the very stone that they were told to walk to.

Because Israel failed to believe in Christ, He was to be a great blessing for her became the cause of her downfall. He was Israel's stumbling stone as Paul puts it. The image here of the stone as applied to Christ, this picture of Him is a common one in the Old Testament. We find it in Genesis 49:24 where the Lord is described as the shepherd, the stone of Israel. In other words, the Lord is a reliable guide and protector. He is like a stone; he is firm, solid, one on whom a person can build his or her life. Dependable, unshakeable, that's the idea in the stone.

In Daniel 2:34-35, that same picture is used of the Messiah, a stone cut out without hands. It comes out of heaven. It strikes the great statue representing gentile kingdoms and crushes it to dust. It pictures Christ as the all-powerful, conquering

king who fills the earth with His kingdom. That’s what the Jews wanted and rightfully so, because that’s what’s promised, a kingdom upon this earth. And it is what we look forward to. It is the hope of this world. But this same stone that is Israel’s hope is also described as Israel’s stumbling block.

Paul shows that from two quotes in Isaiah that he combines. The first is Isaiah 28:16, “This says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed.’” The second quote is Isaiah 8:14, “Then He shall become a sanctuary.” What a promise that is, what a great blessing. God will be a sanctuary to His people like a great stone, impregnable. “But,” he adds, “to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

In the first quote, God lays the stone, He puts it in Zion. In the second quote He is the stone. In Isaiah 28 He is a costly cornerstone. But Paul doesn’t quote that, instead he brings in the description of Isaiah 8, a stone of stumbling because He became that for Israel. They didn’t see Him as a costly stone, they didn’t see Him as a foundation for their lives, the foundation for their lives. They didn’t believe in Him as their sanctuary, flee to Him for refuge and receive Him as the Lord, as God. In fact, the Lord’s claim to deity was one of the reasons that the nation stumbled over Him.

John 10, when Jesus said, “I and the Father are one,” the Jews picked up stones to stone Him and they gave the reason for that in verse 33, “Because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God.” Whenever someone says to you that nowhere in the bible did Jesus claim to be God, go to John 10, read verse 31 and then read verse 33 and the Jewish response and show, well, the Jews certainly understood that He was claiming to be God. They picked up stones to stone Him. They understood His meaning, that He and the Father are one means that He is divine, that He is equal with the Father, that He’s God, and they rejected that.

He was just a man to them, just a common stone in the path, not a costly cornerstone. They saw nothing of value in Him. And after all, He came in a common way. Didn’t come like that great stone out of heaven cut without hands. He came as a helpless infant, a baby born in a insignificant little town in a backwater region of the Roman Empire. He was a man who was born to poor parents, lived a common life,

moved among poor people. He was not attractive to them and yet, what do the scriptures say about that? Isaiah predicted that very thing. He writes about the servant in Isaiah 53:2-3 and he writes that He was like a root out of dry ground, He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him,” and so he writes, “He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.”

They weren't attracted to Him, well, they should have known that the Messiah would come as an unattractive man. His deity caused them to stumble, His humanity caused them to stumble and His words caused them to stumble. He called them to believe in Him, to trust in Him. He stood up in the temple in John 7 on the great day of the feast and He said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” And when the people heard that, they were divided over Him and many of them wanted to seize Him, wanted to arrest Him. Again, in the temple, in John 8, He said, “I am the light of the world,” and the Pharisees rejected that. “Your testimony is not true,” they said.

His claims and His teaching offended them. He proclaimed that salvation is in Himself only, it is through faith in Him and it is not in the law, it's not in the ceremonies. As Paul said, they were pursuing righteousness not by faith but by works. And so they stumbled over Him. Because free salvation offends people. Salvation by grace alone is an offense to human pride. In fact, Christ taught that we are helpless to come to Him. People don't like to hear that.

But in John 6:44, He told that to the multitude, this vast number of people, thousands and thousands of people, perhaps something like 5,000 people gathered there listening to Him teach and He says to them, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” So we are responsible to come. We are responsible to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation, but we can't do that unless God first draws us. That is God's sovereignty in election and faith.

And the people stumbled over that. This vast crowd of people, when they hear this teaching, begin to leave the Lord. So when you come to the end of John 6, the multitudes are gone, He's left with 12 men and one of them, He says, is the devil. People want to put God in their debt. They don't want to be in God's debt. The only way of salvation is to recognize our debt to the Lord. The only way of salvation is through Christ alone and by His death, what He has done for us.

And that is an offense to our pride. It was certainly an offense to the Jewish people, a crucified savior instead of a conquering king. That was a stumbling block to the Jew, Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 1:23, and it's foolishness to the gentile. "The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," 1 Corinthians 1:18. So this is not just a Jewish problem. This was a problem of human nature. Only grace can save. If we are left to ourselves, we would become like Sodom and Gomorrah. If we were left to ourselves, none would be saved, grace must intervene, but we are responsible.

Paul puts sovereignty in election and human responsibility side by side. And Israel was without excuse. It was blessed with privileges. No nation in the history of the world had been blessed like Israel and Paul has given us some of the blessings that the nation was given there at the top of this chapter. But the people misapplied those blessings, they took them to be the basis for their righteousness. They didn't believe that they needed a savior, that they were okay, and so when the savior came, they missed Him. They stumbled over Him.

The Jews had much light, but they closed their eyes to it. Most did not believe and they brought about their own downfall. Israel's tragedy is illustrated by a fable that I came across this past week. It was told by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus, that an eagle was once shot with an arrow. And when he saw the feathers at the end of the shaft, he said, "With our own feathers, not by other's hands are we now smitten."

I had to think about that, the feathers that allowed the eagle to fly were also what let the arrow fly that struck the eagle. So what was the bird's blessing was also its undoing. Now the eagle was a victim. Israel was not. But its own blessings became its undoing when they were misapplied, misinterpreted. It was not by other's hands that Israel was smitten. Paul doesn't blame Israel's downfall on God's purpose in election. He traces Israel's failure to Israel and to its own folly. Israel pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive while those who didn't pursue, who didn't seek that righteousness found it by God's grace in Christ. And everyone who looks for righteousness there finds it. As Isaiah said, "He who believes in Him will not be disappointed."

Are you pursuing righteousness? I hope you are. But if you are doing it by trying to keep God's law or gain God's approval and His acceptance by the things that you do, you will not arrive. Learn from Israel's failure. Humble yourself. Turn to

Christ and believe. Don't think that election is an impediment to salvation. Don't read through this chapter and come to the conclusion, a false conclusion that election keeps people from being saved. It doesn't hinder anyone from salvation. Election is what opens the door to salvation. Without it, we'd all be like Sodom and Gomorrah. Election doesn't prevent people from being saved, sin does that. So repent.

Believe on the one who died in our place, bore our sin and our judgment. Those who do are elect. So may God help you to do that and help all of us to rejoice in the mercy and the grace of God that has saved us who are undeserving and help us to live for Him. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace and your mercy. We come to a text like this, and as we read it we must see what Paul is saying is salvation is all of you, it's your work. You have mercy on whom you have mercy, you harden whom you desire. Your work of salvation is your work, it's not ours and yet, you have blessed multitudes as a result of your mercy and grace. We thank you for that. Pray that you'd bless us with a deeper understanding of that and a desire to serve you. We thank you for Christ whom you sent to die in our place and it's in His name we pray. Amen.