



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (11) Believing, Confessing, Preaching and Hearing

Romans 10:9-21

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We have been making our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, one chapter at a time, and then we came to chapter 10. The first half of chapter 10 has some rather difficult concepts and so I decided to stop at verse 8 and deal with the rest of the chapter in another sermon. As it turns out that works out because the second half of Romans 10 is an appropriate passage to preach on in connection with a profession of faith. It is one of the key passages in Scripture that teaches the close connection between believing in Jesus and confessing our faith in him.

Before we get into that let me remind you that Romans 10 is in the middle of a section in the letter to the Romans that deals with the fact that the majority of Israel, who were God's chosen people, did not believe in Jesus. This was an important matter in New Testament times because God had chosen Israel to be the people from whom the Saviour of the world would be born and when he came most of them did not accept him as their Saviour. That fact required an explanation and that is what Paul does in chapters 9-11 of this letter as well as a number of other places.

In chapter 9, Paul emphasizes the fact that God, right from the beginning of Israel's history, made choices as to who among the offspring of Abraham would be saved and who would not. That chapter is one of the most clear and direct passages in Scripture on God's sovereign prerogative to choose some people to salvation and to ordain others to condemnation. God is the potter. Human beings are his clay

and he has the right as the creator to prepare some vessels for salvation and others for destruction. That is a hard truth for us to accept, but Paul insists that God treats no one unjustly and that we as creatures created by God are not to question God. So, in connection with Israel, it turns out that only a small number of them were actually chosen to eternal life. Paul quotes Isaiah saying, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved...." God's ways are higher than our ways.

Now in chapter 10, Paul emphasizes another perspective about why so many of the Jews did not believe in Jesus. Chapter 9 teaches that the reason that most of Israel did not accept Jesus was that God had only chosen a small number of them to salvation. Chapter 10 teaches that the reason that so most of Israel did not accept Jesus was because of their own ignorance and their own stubbornness. Here the emphasis is not on God's sovereign choice, but on Israel's failure to understand and her stubborn rebellious hearts. Verse 3 says, "For being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." And verse 21, quotes God as saying of Israel, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

Now this laying of these two truths side by side, is very important and very instructive. On the one hand, if people do not believe in Jesus it is because God has not chosen them for salvation. The ultimate reason that someone is saved or not saved is whether God has chosen them for salvation or for damnation. But at the same time Scripture insists that those who are not saved are condemned because of their own sin and rebellion against God. Whenever a person does not believe in Jesus and ends up going to hell, they have rejected whatever revelation from God they have received, and God justly condemns them because of their failure to submit to him and believe in Jesus.

Now it is very significant that Paul just asserts these two truths, side by side, without a hint that there is an intellectual problem here. Of course, he knew that there was an intellectual problem. Paul was a brilliant thinker, well versed in theology and philosophy. It is inconceivable that he did not notice the difficulty of asserting on one hand that people are

saved or damned because God chooses them for salvation or damnation and on the other hand that if people are not saved it is their own fault and God justly condemns them because of their sin. It is inconceivable that that problem just escaped Paul.

And yet he just lays the two truths side by side without any attempt to even discuss the problem – of how man can be held accountable for his actions when God has already determined his salvation or damnation.

Now this has been a huge issue in the history of theology and even in the history of philosophy although in a different context. Even secular atheistic philosophy has to deal with the mystery of free will and human responsibility. For those who do not believe in God at all, it is very difficult to explain the fact that we seem to make genuine choices. That does not harmonize easily with the conviction that the universe is impersonal and that we are nothing more than cogs in a big machine. And indeed, some secular thinkers deny that we genuinely make choices and claim that our choices are determined and that we are only apparently free.

The point is that this whole matter of human choices and genuine responsibility is a huge intellectual problem of human existence and that everyone has to deal with it in some way. Paul gives us God's answer and the approach that God expects us to take. Truth #1, God chooses, some to salvation and others to damnation before they are even born. Truth #2, we make real choices and we are responsible for those choices. Those who are saved must believe in Jesus in order to be saved and if they do not they will not be saved. Those who are condemned are condemned because they rebelled against God and would not repent and come to the Lord for salvation.

And we must believe and live by both of these truths. God apparently is not troubled by the fact that we can't understand how both of these truths can be true at the same time. Paul here is reflecting God's attitude on the matter. We simply confess them both. We simply take them both into account in our thinking and in our living. We submit to the word of God in whatever it teaches even when we do not understand. We do not tell God that something cannot be true simply

because we can't understand how it can be true. We confess that God's ways are higher than our ways and we do not answer back to God.

And a little thought should convince us that it is not so strange that there are things about God and his way with us and with the world that we cannot understand. How could that not be! God is infinite. We are finite. Finiteness is very, very small next to infiniteness. There is a lot more outside the circle of what we can know as human beings than there is inside the circle of what we can know. Out of the infinity of everything God knows he has given us what we need to know and what he wants us to know. And we are to accept our creaturely limitations – let God be God and accept our finite capacities and use the truths that God gives us according to God's will. The perspective is expressed in Deuteronomy 29:29 which says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of his law."

So, we take our responsibility seriously. If we do not believe in Jesus and repent of our sins, we will not be saved, and it will be our own fault. If we do believe in Jesus and repent of our sins, we did it, but only because God has chosen to be saved. Both of those truths are important and precious even though we have no idea how they can both be true at the same time.

Now as he makes the point that Israel did not believe in Jesus because of her own ignorance and stubbornness, Paul makes the wonderful point that salvation is very accessible to those who hear the word of God. That of course meant Israel because one of the great blessings that Israel had received from the Lord was that he had spoken to her and so she had the word of the Lord. That is really the point of verses 6-9 which have those strange words about ascending into heaven or descending into the abyss. Paul is saying that you do not have to go to heaven and bring Christ down to earth or you do not have to go into the abyss and bring Christ back from there. Paul is saying that salvation in Christ is as near as the "word of faith that we proclaim" (Romans 10:8)

His point is that we do not have to earn salvation as the Jewish people thought and we do not have to go searching for it. Rather it comes near to us in the "word of faith" that is proclaimed. He is stressing how close

salvation is to those who hear the word of the gospel – the message of salvation in Jesus. It is not an attainment that is the culmination of hard work. It is not something that is discovered after searching from heaven to the abyss. It is near to everyone who hears the word of faith – the message of the gospel.

It is in the light of this thought that we have to understand verses 9-11. “[B]ecause if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

In order to be saved, all you have to do is believe in Jesus and confess him as Lord. And wherever that message is proclaimed salvation is near. And that is why you do not have to become a Jew in order to be saved and you do not have to keep the law in order to be saved. This makes it possible for Gentiles to be saved. Verses 12-13, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is a wonderful point that Paul is making. He is stressing that salvation is accessible for all who hear the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel is not a call to do some great thing. It is not the beginning of a long search or a great project to earn God’s favor. It comes near in the proclamation of the gospel. Receiving it involves calling on the name of the Lord. It involves believing that God raised Jesus from the dead and it involves confessing publicly that Jesus is Lord. And so, salvation is accessible to all who would have it. No one can say that it is too hard. No one can say that they tried and failed. “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” That is why the good news is good news. We do not go searching for salvation. It comes to us in the word of faith that is preached. That is good news!

I want to highlight a few more things from these verses. First is the absolute necessity of public confession of faith for salvation. Now Paul is not thinking here only of a formal public profession of faith as a way of becoming a communicant member of the church. Requiring a formal

profession of faith is one way that the Church applies what Paul teaches here. But what Paul says here has a much broader application than a formal public profession of faith. His point is that faith in Jesus must be public. It is not possible to be a secret follower of Jesus. It is not possible to be an anonymous follower of Jesus. Believing in Jesus and confessing him before men cannot be separated just as faith and repentance cannot be separated. It belongs to the very nature of saving faith that it confesses Jesus publicly. To refuse to confess Christ publicly is in fact to deny him.

This goes back to Jesus' own words. In Matthew 10:32-33, Jesus says, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." And Jesus is reflecting a principle here that as to do with one of the great purposes for the people of God in God's plan for the salvation of the world. One of the great purposes of God's people throughout the Bible is to make God known in the world. It belongs to the essence of the people of God that we are witnesses who declare the praises of God to the whole world.

Listen to how Psalm 145 speaks of this: Verses 10-12, "All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom." This is why the great commission is such a fundamental part of the Church's mission. One of God's great tasks for his people is to "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the people!" (Psalm 96:3). It is because of this whole-Bible perspective that believing in Jesus and confessing Jesus before men go together. This is one of the purposes for our salvation. We are saved to be witnesses for Jesus and that requires that we confess Jesus as our Saviour and our Lord before men. Being a follower of Jesus is a public affair.

And making public confession of faith as a part of the way to become a communicant member of the church is one application of this principle. As church members we are not members of a secret society. It is the

opposite of that. The church is made of up of people who publicly confess Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

Another important point that Paul makes in this chapter is the importance of hearing the Word of God for coming to faith. In verses 14-17, he makes two important points and one of them as to do with the centrality of hearing the Word of God as the way to faith. Let me just read those verses, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

Now this emphasis on hearing is very interesting. Notice that Paul speaks of hearing the word of God or the gospel and not reading it. This is not to say that no one is ever saved through reading the Bible, but it is clear from this passage that God’s normal way of working faith is through people hearing the message.

Reading can be a solitary activity. Hearing involves at least two people – a speaker and a listener. Of course, Paul lived long before it was possible to record the human voice. His emphasis on hearing made the point that faith is usually born in the context of relationships and community.

We live in a time of a great emphasis on the individual. Christianity respects the individual, but it is a religion of relationships and community. The faith is normally passed on through one person telling another the message of the gospel. People normally come to faith through hearing the message from other people. Faith is normally born through interaction with other people.

This is a very important insight about the Christian life especially in our day of individualism and people finding their own way without interference from anyone else. That is completely opposite the way that the Bible envisions the Christian life. We normally come to faith through

hearing the message from other people and growth in the Christian life is not a solitary affair, but rather it happens in community. That is not to say that there is no place to be alone with God, but there is a much greater emphasis in the Bible on being together with God. By teaching that faith comes from hearing, one of the things that Paul is saying is that faith usually involves hearing the message from other people.

The second point that Paul makes in verses 14-17 is that preaching is the normal way that people hear the message. Verse 14b-15, "And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And now are they to preach unless they are sent." Paul here is speaking about preachers who are sent. That means that he is speaking about preachers who are called by God and set aside by the church to preach the gospel. He is referring to people like himself. Listen to how he refers to himself in Romans 1:1 "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." We read of this setting apart in Acts 13:2-3, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

This is what Paul has in mind when he says, "And how are they to preach unless they are sent." This is not to deny that there is a role for personal evangelism in people coming to faith. But the emphasis in the Bible is on people coming to faith upon hearing the message from those who have been set apart by God to preach his word. In the Old Testament God spoke especially through the prophets. In the New Testament, God sets aside the apostles and later preachers and evangelists. The point is that the Bible teaches that the normal way that people come to faith is through the word preached by men who have been called by God to preach his word.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism reflects this teaching in Q/A 89. "Q. How is the word made effectual to salvation? A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation."

This is why we in the Reformed tradition place such an emphasis on preaching and being faithful in attending worship services and in inviting unsaved friends to worship services. Again, this is not to say that God only works through preaching, but it is to say that his usual way of bringing people to faith and building them up in the faith is through the preaching of the word of God by those whom God has called to be preachers - whose call has been recognized by the church which has then set them apart for that task.

The reason for this is the way that God relates to people. He is the king. He speaks with authority. And his way of bringing the message of salvation is a way that emphasizes his kingship and his authority. He sends spokesmen – men that he has called to this task to speak on his behalf. The whole process of the church recognizing that call and setting men apart for that task emphasizes that the preached word is an official declaration from God that comes with the authority of God. Paul says this explicitly in 2 Corinthians 5:20, “Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

This way of bringing the message highlights the majesty and the authority of God. In the formality of setting aside preachers and in the formality of preaching by those officially set apart, the greatness and the power of the king are emphasized as well as the submissive attitude of the hearers. Behind the official preaching of the word is God himself and the message comes with his authority. The congregation is gathered before the king to receive his word. And that is the context in which faith is normally born and grows. Faith is not something that we discover. It is a response to a message from the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And it is a message of good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

The tragedy of Israel is that she, for the most part, did not receive the message. But many of the Gentiles did. And the church grew and made its way through time until our day. The message comes to you this morning. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

## Table Meditation

The passage that we have considered this morning teaches the importance of publicly confessing our faith. There is a connection between that and the Lord's Supper – not explicitly, but conceptually, for the Lord's Supper is also a public confession of our faith. By taking part in the Lord's Supper we “proclaim the Lord's death.” 1 Corinthians 11:26 “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”

Leon Morris in his commentary on 1 Corinthians points out that the word “proclaim” is “mostly used of proclaiming the gospel.” He continues, “The solemn observance of Holy Communion is a vivid proclamation of the Lord's death; in word and symbol Christ's death is set forth before people. The Eucharist [Lord's Supper] is an acted sermon, and acted proclamation of the death which it commemorates ... [and he quotes someone else] ‘we do not commit ourselves very far by listening to a sermon but a communicant both commits himself and confesses his faith.’”

When we confess our faith, we confess faith in Jesus as our Saviour and our Lord. And we confess that “our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.” We are saved from our sins because Jesus died for our sins. Jesus gave his life in our place. Jesus paid the penalty that we deserve which is death. When we confess our faith we publicly confess that Jesus is our Saviour – that we believe in him and in believing receive the right standing with God that he obtained for us by his death on the cross. When we take part in the Lord's Supper we make that same confession all over again and in so doing we proclaim the Lord's death.

Perhaps you think that that is not much of a proclamation. We are here in this building. No one sees us except those who are here with us. That is true. But we are part of a world-wide church and that great church celebrates the Lord's Supper on a regular basis and the world knows that. And so the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the Lord's death all through the world. Because the Lord's Supper is a regular part of the worship of the church, we confess

that Jesus' death is the basis for our hope and the basis for our salvation. Just like our regular worship services, our regular celebration of the Lord's Supper is part of our witness to the Lord's death as the source of our life and our hope.