

IS GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR UNBELIEF?

SERIES: THE MYSTERY OF THE JEWS



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One of the most common objections raised to the exclusive nature of the gospel is: "If Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, what about the native in Africa who has never heard the gospel?" This is an important question. If salvation requires a certain knowledge, can we blame God for unbelief? Is it his fault for not making the knowledge known to all?

I first heard this objection in the early 70s when Dave Roper, our college pastor, came to my university for an evangelistic dorm meeting. While he was sharing the gospel, a young coed kept interrupting him and asking, "What about the guy in Africa who has never heard the gospel?" Finally, he stopped, looked her straight in the eye, and asked, "Isn't the real reason you are having trouble accepting Jesus Christ your desire to continue sleeping with your boyfriend, not your concern for the man in Africa?" With that, she turned white and said, "You are right." As a young student, I learned through Dave's methods that the real difficulty in receiving Christ is not always intellectual. More often it is a moral issue.

This is the question Paul addresses in Romans 10:14-21 with regard to Israel's rejection of Christ. As you know, he began this chapter describing his desire for the salvation of Israel, a nation that had a zeal for God which was not in accordance with knowledge. As a result of their misplaced zeal, they missed the righteousness of God which comes by faith in the Messiah. Is God responsible for their unbelief? Is their ignorance his fault?

Anticipating this question, Paul begins by listing five prerequisites for salvation. Then he shows where in that chain the process was broken so we can determine the blame for Israel's present unbelief. Through this passage, we will learn where we can place the blame in our own lives if we are having difficulty making Christ Lord or if we are experiencing unbelief.

Let us look at the prerequisites beginning in verse 13.

I. THE PREREQUISITES FOR SALVATION 10:13-15a

...for "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?

Paul begins by quoting the prophet Joel who had a vision of the day when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. Joel saw that after that event, which was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, the next event in salvation history would be the day of judgment. Between these two days, he says whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Thus, the first prerequisite is that a person make an appeal for salvation. This requires a choice of the will to embrace Christ as Lord.

But Paul says that before a person can call upon the name of the Lord, he must have faith in the One who saves. This is the second prerequisite. His heart must be convinced of Jesus' identity as the risen Lord.

Even that faith has a prerequisite. How can you have faith before you hear the name of the One who saves? Before the heart can be convinced, you have to hear a thoughtful, accurate presentation of the gospel. Therefore, the third prerequisite is the message.

But before you have a message, you must have a messenger who announces the One who saves. It was not God's will to spread the gospel through advertising blimps floating around the world dropping tracts. He always communicates his message through a person. This is the fourth prerequisite—a preacher to declare the message.

Finally, how can one preach unless he is sent? Paul understood that the process of salvation begins with divine initiative. Preaching cannot be initiated by humans. Preachers who are heralding the

gospel must be sent by God, authorized by God, and gifted by God. From the biblical point of view, the process of salvation begins with God not man.

These are the steps of salvation. First, God sends a messenger. Second, the messenger must obey and preach. Third, the message must be heard. Then it must be believed in the heart. Finally, there is a call to God for salvation by the hearer.

I went through these steps as a teenager after groping for God for five years and hungering for eternal life. When I became 16, God sent a messenger to me—Dainard Paulson, a retired New York Jets football player. He had just become a businessman when he moved to the San Fernando Valley. There God put on his heart to open up his office at night to talk about Jesus Christ to high school athletes. Dainard obeyed that call. When he shared the message clearly and accurately, I was there and heard it. I then believed it in my heart, and during that six-month period I made a call to God, asking him to be the Lord of my life.

In these five steps of salvation, there are three parties involved. First, God authorizes, equips and sends the messenger. Second, the messenger must obey the call. If he does not obey, God says of him, "I will require the blood of innocent men on his head." Finally, there is the recipient who is invited to believe the gospel. The question of our text is: "If Israel did not believe, who is to blame—God, the preacher, or the people?" This is what Paul will detail for us. In verse 15, the apostle tells us that God fulfilled his role.

II. GOD FULFILLED HIS ROLE 10:15b

Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!"

Look at that verse in its original context in Isaiah 52:7:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of the one bringing good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,**

**Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, 'Your God
reigns!'**

Remember this text was written to the Babylonian exiles. Isaiah saw a day when God would bring salvation through a Messianic king who would deal with Israel's enemies. This included not just Babylon but her real enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil. As this King, Jesus won a victory over all the forces of evil through the cross. Isaiah also saw that the cross would not be an isolated event in Israel's history. From that point on, God appointed messengers who had seen the victory to go forth from the battle to the capital city Zion and say, "Good news! God has won! He is King! Peace to you!" This is where we get the word "gospel." The good news is that God has won the victory over evil. He is King, and peace is offered to all.

Paul says that what Isaiah predicted God has done in history. Of course, he himself as an apostle was one of the messengers. God did send his messengers to Zion. All the apostles were sent to declare the good news. As you will notice in Romans 9-11, Paul is always quoting Isaiah 40 to 66.

As many scholars have observed, Isaiah 40 to 66 is a mini-New Testament in structure. It opens with the voice crying in the wilderness, just as the Gospels begin with John the Baptist. Chapter 53 talks about the atoning work of this Servant who will suffer and die. Jesus fulfilled this through the cross and the resurrection. The apex of the material is chapter 54 and following which describes the new age that the Messiah introduces which involves a new covenant, a new people, a new land, and a new spirit. This new age is characterized by joy. All of this is descriptive of the book of Acts and all of the epistles. Isaiah 66 ends with the new heavens and the new earth which is exactly where Revelation ends.

As I shared with you before, three years ago, we had an exciting time translating this text with my friend Bruce, an orthodox Jew. Bruce, who had his Hebrew Bible and his Greek Old Testament, began to study the Isaiah passage. When we translated Romans 10:15, he went back to Isaiah 52 and started reading. Then he came to chapter 66 in which verses 18 and 19 read:

**...the time is coming to gather all
nations and tongues. And they shall**

**come and see My glory. And I will
set a sign among them and will send
survivors from them to the nations:
Tarshish, Put, Lud, Mashech, Rosh,
Tubal, and Javan, to the distant
coastlands that have neither heard My
fame nor seen My glory. And they
will declare My glory among the na-
tions.**

The text goes on to say that God will take priests from these Gentiles. This action will inaugurate the new heavens and earth. When Bruce read this in the Hebrew text and compared it to the Greek, he saw that the Greek text translated "send survivors" as "*saved apostles*." The word "sent" in Greek is where we get the noun "apostle." And he noticed these sent ones would go to Tarshish. Where was Paul from? Tarshish! Bruce's eyes grew big and he said, "The apostle Paul sees himself as the fulfillment of what Isaiah wrote. God is making the survivors into apostles, and he is sending them to all the nations. This is the beginning of the new heavens and earth!" Bruce is a better exegete than most of us Christians!

Paul quotes Isaiah to show that there has been divine initiative. God has authorized his preachers who were sent not just to Zion but to all the nations. God is vindicated! He has done his part to get the message out.

Did the preachers fulfill their role? Were these messengers faithful? Paul answers this question in verses 17 and 18.

III. THE PREACHERS FULFILLED THEIR ROLE 10:17-18

**So faith comes from hearing, and
hearing by the word of Christ. But I
say, surely they have never heard,
have they? Indeed they have:**

**"Their voice has gone out into all the
earth,
And their words to the ends of the
world."**

Paul says the preachers were faithful. He supports his answer from Psalm 19 which begins:

**The heavens are telling of the glory
of God;
And the firmament is declaring the
work of His hands.
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals
knowledge...**

**Their voice has gone out through all
the earth,
And their utterances [words] to the**

end of the world.

In their quiet way, the heavens continually speak about the glory of God the Creator. Think about how the stars shine each and every night. We see God's transcendence, might and majesty nightly! Although that speech is silent, it goes forth faithfully. Romans 1:19 says this knowledge is expressed so clearly man is without excuse regarding the Creator.

Just as the creation witnesses faithfully, so the apostles in their spoken words plainly declared the way of salvation throughout the world of their day. The book of Acts and the epistles reflect this. The Sanhedrin said to Peter in Acts 5:28, "Behold, you have *filled* Jerusalem with your teaching." When Paul set up shop in Asia, he rented a hall in Ephesus and preached four hours a day for two years. In Acts 19:10, Luke says: "*All* who lived in Asia heard the word of God." In Colossians 1:23, Paul affirms, "...the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed to *every creature* under heaven." To Paul, the "known world" referred to everywhere Jews lived. In most parts of the Mediterranean where Jews were present, the gospel had been preached.

Thus, concerning Israel and the gospel, God was faithful to initiate, and the preachers were obedient to speak. But the people failed in their role. Look at verse 16 and 19-21.

IV. ISRAEL FAILED IN HER ROLE 10:16, 19-21

However, they did not all heed the glad tidings, for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?"...But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? At the first Moses says,

**"I will make you jealous by that
which is not a nation,
By a nation without understanding
will I anger you."**

And Isaiah is very bold and says, "I was found by those who sought me not,

**I became manifest to those who did
not ask for me."**

But as for Israel he says, "All the day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

Paul says Israel heard the message. To emphasize his point, he says, "Even the ignorant Gentiles, the barbarians, understood the message! Where were you?" This would be like a professor who must

defend himself to an "A" student who has failed a test. When the student protests saying he had not received enough information and what he did receive was unclear, the professor calls upon an "F" student who received an "A." The logic is if he can pass the test anyone can. If these Gentiles understood the gospel without having any Jewish heritage, what happened to the Jews?

The problem was not that they did not hear. Rather, they disobeyed. Why did they disobey? Paul presents an argument which goes to the heart of the matter. He joins Isaiah 53 with Deuteronomy 32 to make a powerful statement. First, Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" This text begins with a description of the suffering servant who would offer himself as a sacrifice. The passage says he would be despised and forsaken. Isaiah is amazed that the message which is so clear is to be rejected by the many.

Paul says the reason the servant is rejected is not intellectual but moral. Israel is an idolatrous nation, and they love their idols more than God. Paul points this out by bringing in Deuteronomy and linking it with Isaiah which says the Father is holding out his hands to a disobedient, obstinate people. The word "*disobedient*" in the Hebrew text is "*turn aside*" and is usually used in the context of idolatry. The text in Deuteronomy is immediately preceded by: "They have made Me jealous with what is *not* God; they have provoked Me to anger with *their idols*." When Moses wrote that text, the nation had physical idols in their midst. Paul is saying that after 1400 years, even after the Babylonian exile and return, they were still idol worshippers. In other words, they had made no progress spiritually.

This is an amazing statement, for after the Babylonian captivity the land was cleansed of physical idols. Therefore, Paul is saying, "You may not have physical idols, but as Jeremiah says, 'Your lips speak about Me but your heart is far from Me.' You are still idolators in the heart." From the Babylonian captivity to the New Testament, Judaism progressed along four different lines, each claiming to be the true Israel and the pure people. But Jesus said none of them were the true kingdom.

First, there were the Sadducees, the wealthy landowners in Jerusalem. They planned on spreading the kingdom through their wealth and politics and

wanted everything to remain status quo. Jesus said to them, "The kingdom does not belong to you. I am giving it to the poor whom you are oppressing...and to the lame and the weak."

Then there were the Pharisees who wanted to bring in the kingdom by intensifying the Torah and all the laws. They wanted to live in outward purity. Jesus said, "The kingdom does not belong to you. You are whitewashed tombs! It is not the letter of the law but the spirit. You missed the kingdom."

There were also the Essenes who were the isolationists of their day. Since things were so immoral in their world, they decided to build communes in the desert where they could live in seclusion. Jesus said, "The kingdom does not come by making the circle of life smaller. I am going to open up the kingdom to Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners. My life is so powerful it will make them pure from the inside out."

Last, there were the zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome. These were men of means, technique and power. Jesus said, "If you take up the sword, you will die by it. I want you to love Rome. Pay your taxes. The kingdom will belong to many who are Romans."

His message was radical! This is why he was crucified. He said Judaism in all its forms was equivalent to physical idolatry. The devil had infiltrated the nation, like tares among the wheat, and had destroyed true Judaism. Jesus said, "I am the true Israel. The only way to be a part of Israel from now on is by entering into a relationship with me." You can imagine the anger he provoked! The people loved their idolatry more than God. Even though they no longer practiced physical idolatry, they worshipped wealth, power, prestige, and self-righteousness. Jesus said, "When my kingdom comes, we are going to destroy all forms of the physical kingdom." This happened in 70 A.D., with the destruction of Jerusalem.

Paul goes on to say that even though Israel was fully responsible for their unbelief, God is still going to win them back by means of jealousy. What a gracious God we serve! He says in Deuteronomy,

"Though they have stirred Me to jealousy with what is no God, I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people. Just as they provoked Me with their

idols,

I will *provoke* them with a foolish nation."

This is the key to world history! This is why the Jews as a people have been spread within every Gentile nation on the face of the earth. God has done this so that when the Gentiles come to Christ, the Jews are there to observe it and to become provoked with jealousy. By this means, God will bring them to Christ. This is what convinced my friend Bruce that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus Christ explains history. The way God brings back his wayward son and daughter is to put in them the heart to feel exactly as he feels. When they are reaching out their hands and facing rejection, they understand that this is how God felt for them.

Who is to blame for Israel's unbelief? The blame does not lie with God for he was faithful. It does not lie with the preachers. They were faithful also. It lies with Israel whose problem was idolatry.

Since most of us are Gentiles, what are the implications of this text for our lives? I think it leaves us with three exhortations for what to do when we want to blame God for our unbelief. If you are having trouble making God Lord of your life, I think this text tells you to do three things.

V. THE IMPLICATIONS

First, *examine what God has done*. Has he been faithful? Did he send us preachers, and was the message clear? Last week, we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Peninsula Bible Church. To whom should we pay tribute but to Ray Stedman who came here 38 years ago and stayed to minister faithfully? I personally believe that what Martin Luther was to the Reformation, Ray Stedman has been to the American church. God put it in his heart to put the church back on the cutting edge of life. Instead of being a religious institution with professional clergy, the church was returned to the biblical pattern of the New Testament. God has used Ray mightily in this area.

Ray is a man of keen spiritual insight with a tenacious memory and a gifted intellect. All of his files are in his mind! Being well-read, he knows world history and science. On the other hand, he is earthy, humble, simple, and realistic. His greatest attribute is his powerful love for Christ. He never came here to be king and to rule over the congregation. He

wants Christ to be the Lord of this church. Because of this, he has never accepted the title of senior pastor. This was not just a symbolic gesture, it was a reality.

Ray has preached faithfully for 38 years. And God had it in his will that these messages be published and sent out all over the face of the earth. Our catalog now has 1500 messages covering every biblical matter, and we have a mailing list of 5,000 people—2,000 of whom are pastors and Bible teachers. It was also God's desire to start Discovery Books so that the messages could be printed in book form. During the intern program in the early 70s, our spiritual diet was these books. I was so thankful to feed on this gold. God also sent this man to 34 countries to minister. I think Ray can say, "I am innocent of the blood of men. I made the whole counsel of God known to you."

We have to say that our lack of knowledge is not because God was not faithful or that the preacher has not spoken. The problem with our generation is that we do not read. We are the television generation. I think everyone in this congregation should read the three PBC classics—*Authentic Christianity*, *Body Life*, and *Spiritual Warfare*. These cover the three fundamental relationships with Jesus Christ, the body, and the world.

We are also the generation of professional counselors. When we have problems, we quickly run to our counselors. Much professional counseling is legitimate, for we live in a difficult age filled with a variety of abuses. But some counseling should not be necessary. If we are like the student who refuses to go to class and then has the nerve to call the professor the night before the exam and ask him for private tutoring, we are misusing counseling. The professor would say to the student, "Have you not been listening?" He might even quote Proverbs 17:16 which says, "Why is there a price in the hand of a fool to buy wisdom when he has no heart to learn." I think some of our counseling could be eliminated if the saints did their homework and studied. We need to examine what God has done and give thanks for our teachers who have taught us. The message is indeed clear.

Second, *examine your own heart*. If you had posed that young girl's objection regarding the native in Africa to Dave Roper, what kind of question would he ask you in return? He told the college

coed the real reason she did not want to accept Christ was because she was sleeping with her boyfriend. Perhaps there is an idol in your heart, and this is why you are having trouble making Jesus Lord. The forms of idolatry that were present in Jesus' day still exist. We have just given them different names.

Some of us are Sadducees and struggle with the idol of materialism. Our lives are so comfortable we do not want to risk anything for the spiritual kingdom. Since all our investments are in our earthly Jerusalem, we prefer the status quo and avoid change. Our politics are dedicated to preserving the comfortable lifestyle we have in Silicon Valley.

Others of us may be like the Pharisees. Perhaps, we have intensified our religion, and we know where we stand at all times. But our belief system is external; there is no heart involved. Thus, all of life is predictable. This leads to the sin of self-righteousness.

Others of us may be like the Esenes. After viewing this corrupt world, we try to isolate ourselves from it. Thus, we cloister ourselves with those who think like us, look like us and act like us. Recently, I spoke with a man from Los Angeles who told me in disgust that the entire area was beginning to fill with Koreans, Iranians, and Mexicans. He said, "We Caucasians are a minority! I hate foreigners." He keeps moving from one neighborhood to another trying to cloister himself from these people. After talking to him, I was not sure he was a Christian, for his views were more like the Esenes than Christ. A true Christian would welcome this movement of people as the expanding of the kingdom. He would see his mission field as his neighborhood.

Others of us may be zealots. I mean this personally, not politically. The zealots of Jesus' day knew what they wanted and how to get it—by force. Many of us function as people of technique who know what to do to make things happen. This is also idolatry. I know many in this congregation today who are being broken because of pursuing this idol. For years, they have made things happen through their own abilities. Now they are facing hurting marriages or losing their jobs. They are finding out for the first time that they are inadequate. Their methods are not working with regards to their spouses and their children.

Examine what God has done. Give

him thanks. Then examine your own heart. Once you wake up to the fact that God and the preachers are vindicated and that you are to blame, there is a third exhortation.

Allow God to have his way in your heart. Allow him to do the necessary surgery. I visited my father this week who just had open heart surgery at the age of 79. I wondered how he would react to such a major operation since he was a surgeon himself. When I talked with him on the phone, he said, "It was just routine." But when I saw the scar from his neck to his navel, I knew this was no routine procedure. They sawed through his sternum, opened up the chest cavity, took the heart out, and performed five bypasses. I said, "Routine! Are you kidding?" This is the kind of surgery God wants to perform on us to remove the idols. It is not cosmetic or minor; it is open heart surgery.

The best model I can find in the Old Testament of one who submitted to this is King David. When he committed murder and adultery, God performed major surgery on his heart. David watched his younger son Absalom carry out a moral rebellion, much like we had in the 60s. He started a revolution with a new morality—free sex. He demonstrated this new "freedom" by having sex with ten of David's concubines publicly on the roof of the king's palace. What would that do to you as a father? David was grieved and reached his hands out to his boy in reconciliation. He wanted him home, but he never got him back. He said, "Absalom, Absalom, O my son Absalom, would I have died in your place." Instead of becoming bitter or self-righteous, David looked up to God and saw that this was how God viewed him. In your difficult situation, do not lash out at God in self-righteousness. When you face rejection, say to yourself, "This is what God went through for me." That kind of attitude made David a beautiful man.

The next time someone asks, "What about the native in Africa?" consider how God might respond. I think he is reaching out his arms to us and saying, "What about you?"

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