

Israel's Unbelief

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] So as I said, today we are continuing our study in the letter to the Romans and we've come to chapter 10 and we're going to really look at the whole passage that we read, but we can just focus our minds by reading again verses 19 to 21.

But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation. With a foolish nation I will make you angry. In Isaiah it's so bold as to say I've been found by those who did not seek me.

I've shown myself to those who did not ask for me. But of Israel he says, all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.

The passage that we read is one of the most powerful passages in the whole of Scripture. It's a remarkable chapter because it's got the potential on the one hand to burst our hearts with joy for all that it speaks about.

But it's also got the potential to break our hearts with sorrow. And I suppose if we understand it well it's probably going to do both.

[1 : 1 1] In these chapters, chapters 9, 10 and 11, Paul is addressing the question of Israel. Now although Paul was a leader in the Christian church and this is one of the most well-known Christians who there has ever been, he was of course an Israelite himself and his background before he came to faith was one of a very, very committed Jew.

And here in these chapters he's talking about how the Gospel relates to the people of Israel, that ancient chosen people of God.

And in many ways this section, chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11, are like an extra bit, what we call a parenthesis, a bit in the middle of the letter that in some ways seemed like they don't quite fit in. You'll remember a few weeks ago we looked at this slide which is telling us the structure of the letter of Romans. Sometimes Romans can be a hard letter to read and you're reading through it all and it can be a wee bit hard to keep orientated.

So sometimes it's really helpful to remember that the structure is actually quite simple. It's just in two big parts. First part is all about knowing the Gospel. The second part is about living the Gospel.

[2 : 1 9] And right in the middle you've got this section talking all about Israel. And it kind of sometimes feels like it's just sitting in there almost slightly out of place because you could go from the end of chapter 8 to the start of chapter 12 and it would flow perfectly.

And in many ways when you go to chapter 12 you have to remind yourself of what Paul has been saying in chapter 8 that the narrative of the letter flows through very, very clearly.

There's this bit in the middle all about Israel and it's easy to think, well, what's it doing there? But if we remember back at the very beginning Paul sets out very clearly the scope and theme of his letter.

He says, this letter is all about the Gospel. He's saying, I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. It's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. That's the great theme of Romans. He's explaining how the good news of Jesus Christ works.

And at the end of verse 16 he adds a really important statement. He says it's to the Jew first and also to the Greek. And so he is emphasizing that the Gospel message is both for Jew and for Greek.

[3 : 3 2] And that's really why he's so anxious to devote this attention in the middle of the letter to the question of Israel. And he makes it absolutely clear that he is passionate, absolutely passionate about the fate of his kinsmen, the Israelites.

You see that at the start of chapter 9, you see that at the start of chapter 10, he is absolutely passionate about their situation and where they stand before God.

He says in chapter 9, I'm speaking the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen, according to the flesh.

And then at the start of chapter 10, which we already says, my brothers, my heart's desire and prayer for God, to God for them, is that they might be saved. And so you've got this immensely powerful statement of how Paul is saying, I'm willing to be cut off myself in order for these Israelites to be saved.

And I want to just pause there for just one minute to notice the difference between Paul the Christian and Paul the Jew. Because you'll remember, I'm sure, that when Paul was a Jew, which is what we can read about in the early chapters of the Book of Acts, he was so passionate about his Judaism that he was ready to go and persecute Christians.

[5 : 04] He was ready to arrest them. And he even approved of their execution. He was so passionate that he was ready to kill the enemies of his faith.

But now, as a Christian, there's a sense in which it's the Jews who are now his enemy, because they're opposing his message. And so we ask the question, well, is Paul as passionate? Is he prepared to kill in order to defend Christianity in the same way that he was willing to kill in order to defend Judaism? Well, no.

Paul's passion is even greater, because Paul is now willing to die that his enemies might be saved. And that's the difference that the grace of Jesus Christ can make in someone's life. So Paul is addressing this question of Israel, and he's particularly addressing the fact that now in this era of the gospel, it's the people who aren't Jews, the Greeks or the Gentiles who are enjoying the blessings of this good news.

[6 : 13] And so he's almost asked the question, well, what's gone wrong for Israel? If you look at the Old Testament, all these promises throughout the Old Testament, whenever you read through the Old Testament, it's always going on about Israel.

And that's the focus of God's dealings with the world. And yet now in the New Testament, it's the people who aren't Israelites, the Gentiles, as they tend to be called.

These are the people who are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and the Israelites are pushing Him away. And Paul's asking, what's gone wrong?

Why has this happened? And he makes it very clear, first of all, that it's not God who has got it wrong. He says early in chapter nine, it is not as though the Word of God has failed.

And one of the great emphasis of chapter nine that we were looking at last week is the fact that the situation now experienced by the Jews is not contradicting anything that the Old Testament said. In fact, it's fulfilling what was prophesied.

[7 : 10] It's not a failure on God's part. The truth is, it's a failure on Israel's part. And that's what Paul emphasizes in chapters nine and ten.

Israel, even though they had so many privileges, even though they were God's old covenant people, they have got it wrong now. And he unpacks for us in many ways the mistakes that they've made.

And I want us just to think about that together today, a wee bit, because at the heart of Israel's mistake was the fact that they tried to approach God on the wrong terms.

And they did that in three ways, which we're going to unpack a wee bit. But what we really need to recognize is that that's three mistakes that we can make as well.

And so I want you just to imagine, even if you don't believe in God, imagine there is a God. And just go with me on this one just now and think to yourself, how should God be approached?

[8 : 13] What are the terms for approaching God? Israel got it wrong, got these terms wrong in three different ways. First of all, they thought that they could stand over God.

And so I've got a wee diagram here. Those of you who are visiting here will quickly discover, I love pictures. And so here, you've got God, right? Obviously.

And you've got somebody standing over God and almost looking down and thinking that they can tell God what to do.

Paul reminds us at the start of chapter nine that the Israelites had a very special status. So in the Old Testament, Israelites were unique to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises to them belong the patriarchs.

That just means the sort of senior figures in senior important figures of the Old Testament era. All these privileges, as we said, Old Testament constantly going on about Israel.

[9 : 12] But having that status of being special could very, very easily be twisted in a way that instead of thinking we belong to God, you could actually think to yourself, God belongs to us.

And in many ways, the Israelites were guilty of thinking that the special status they had, all these things, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, all of these things gave them the right to determine what God should do and should not do.

So it's like the picture there, they're looking down on God, telling him what to do. A great example of that is in John chapter eight, when Jesus is speaking with the Jews, he says to them, I speak of what I've seen with my father and you do what you have heard from your father.

The Jews answered him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, if you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did. But now you're seeking to kill me, a man who's told you the truth that I heard from God.

This is not what Abraham did, you're doing the works your father did. They said we were not born of sexual immorality, which is a slight at the circumstances in which Jesus was born.

[10 : 19] They say we have one father, even God. And so when Jesus challenges them, their response is to say, no, no, no, no, God is ours. How dare you challenge us?

How dare you tell us what we are supposed to do? And so they are thinking that God was theirs, that they have this great sense of entitlement to God.

And I think that's part of what Paul is challenging in chapter nine, because in chapter nine, Paul speaks about that great doctrine of election.

And it seems to be that the Jews have this pride in their status as God's chosen ones. And yet Paul warns them in Romans chapter nine, he says, not all of Israel are of Israel, not all who descend from Israel belong to Israel.

That's basically a way of saying you can be part of that nation, but you can still be far from God, and you can still not have a right relationship with God.

[11 : 24] And Paul's teaching in chapter nine really, really powerfully challenges that mindset. He is saying the fact that you can trace your descendants back from Abraham, perhaps the fact that you can say that you've got this special lineage and special statement, that is no guarantee at all that your relationship with God is right.

And Paul says not everyone who's a physical descendant of Abraham is actually saved. And the Old Testament itself proves that. And Paul anticipates the Jews as hang on, that's not fair. And yet Paul says very powerfully says, who are you, O man, to answer back to God?

And so if we go back to our picture, you've got these people who are standing over God and saying we have the status, we have the heritage, God can fit into the box that we are setting.

And Paul says, who do you think you are? Answering back to God. And he's making it absolutely clear that we can't approach God on those terms and neither can we.

Neither can we. And yet people make this mistake all the time today. We think that we can stand over God and tell him what to do.

[12 : 50] And it happens in loads of different ways because you see people and they will hold onto a belief in God. And so they'll say, yeah, I believe in God. I believe in a higher power.

And yet that God seems to have no authority over their lives at all. It doesn't really shape the way they live.

So people will spend their lives using Jesus's name as a swear. And people will spend their lives dismissing the Bible as irrelevant and outdated.

People will place God pretty near the bottom of a list of priorities where work or money or family or football or Facebook will come before him. And yet when it comes to the question of eternal life, God is meant to do everything that we want him to do.

And it's like we stand over God and say, you do what we tell you. And it's a reminder of what a famous German poet called Heine, I don't know how to pronounce it.

[13 : 57] Heine. Supposedly said on his deathbed, of course God will forgive me. That's his job. And I don't know if he actually said that and I don't know what he meant by that.

But a lot of people have interpreted that as a kind of joke, as if to say, God's meant to forgive us. Of course he will. It's just an example of standing over God, telling him what to do.

And Paul is telling us you absolutely cannot do that. And really, common sense should tell us that you can't do that.

Because if we know anything about God, we should know that God is massive and we are tiny. God is our creator. We are just the creation.

God is holy, which means he's set apart at a different level, a completely different level to us. He is absolutely massive.

[15:02] We can never stand over him. We can never tell him what to do.

That's the wrong view of God. And I remember once listening to a sermon. It was a sermon by Eric Alexander, who's my Tim Keller.

Everybody else quotes Tim Keller. I quote Eric Alexander. He was a church, he's still alive. He's a retired church of Scotland minister. I remember hearing him say in a sermon and it was really powerful.

He said, people always ask the question, will you accept Jesus? Will you accept Jesus? Will you accept Jesus? But he said, the even more serious question is, will Jesus accept you?

Can't stand over God? Can't tell him what to do. The Jews thought they could. That was their first mistake. The second mistake they made was that they thought they could work their way up to God.

[16:08] There's a very realistic scale drawing of a staircase. The idea that you can work your way up to God. This is highlighted in what Paul says in these chapters.

He says that the Gentiles pursued a righteousness by works of the law. So the idea of righteousness is God's standard.

So we think of God, he's up and his standards are really high. The Jews have made this mistake of thinking that they can work their way up to that standard by doing good stuff, that that will bring them up to the level that they need.

And that in many ways is the great error that Paul is addressing in this letter. The idea that they can work their way up to God. He's saying you cannot reach God's level by your own efforts.

You cannot do it by your works. But it's interesting, he says that these people have a zeal for a relationship with God. So that they care about God, they want a relationship with God.

[17:13] They're trying to build that relationship up on their own efforts, on their own merit. And we do exactly the same thing today.

All around you, you will find people in the Christian church and also in many of the other faiths of the world trying to do the same thing, trying to ground the value of their status before God in their own efforts.

In other words, saying, I'm a pretty good person, therefore, God will accept me on that basis.

But we need to be really, really clear. Again, this is coming to God on the wrong terms. So remember, if you believe that there is a God, you have to think, what are the terms for approaching this God?

You think, well, surely it's that I just work my way up to that God and I have to be good enough, more good stuff than bad stuff in my life will reach me there. But no, Paul is saying that is the wrong terms for approaching God.

[18:18] Because remember, an accurate view of God recognizes that God is massive and that God is unbelievably high, indescribably high. That means he is unreachable if we just try to do it on our own.

Completely unreachable. And Paul captures really well what he's trying to say here when he says that the Jews had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

Because if we think that we can work our way up a staircase to God by our own efforts, then it's a failure in terms of our knowledge, because we're not recognizing and not understanding how high God is and how broken we are.

We can't work our way up to God. So can't look down on God and tell Him what to do. Can't work your way up to God and is if to be good enough.

The third mistake that the Israelites made was that they thought they could just wander away from God and find another one. And at the end of the chapter, Paul describes the Israelites as a disobedient and contrary people.

[19:28] That's actually a quote from the Old Testament from a book called Isaiah, chapter 65, where he says, I spread out my hands all day to a rebellious people who walk in a way that's not good, following their own devices, are people who provoke me, my face continually, sacrificing in

gardens and making offerings on bricks.

So that we last sentence that talks about sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks. It can sound strange to us, but it's really an expression of religious devotion to a false God, because that was how people worshiped false gods in those days.

They would offer sacrifices, making offerings not to the one through God, but to various other pagan gods. And it was an issue that constantly plagued the Israelites throughout their history.

They kept on wandering away from God. They kept on following false gods. They kept on doing things that God had said, don't do. They kept on looking at the nations of the world around them who worshiped all sorts of different gods, gods of fertility, gods of the storm.

And they kept on thinking, oh, we're going to do that. And they would follow the world and walk away from God. They would wander away from Him.

[20 : 45] And the same attitude is all around us today. Humanity wanders away from God. Humanity rebels against God. Humanity dismisses God and does its own thing.

And if God is God, if God is real, then we surely see that the attitude that wanders away from God in rebellion is bonkers, absolutely crazy to push God away if He's real.

And yet people do it all the time. It led Israel into disaster. It'll lead us into disaster. We cannot wander away from God in that way.

So the Israelites were guilty of approaching God on the wrong terms in the wrong way. They thought they could stand over God. They can't. They thought they could work their way up to God. They can't. They frequently wandered away and tried to find an alternative God.

They can't do that either. And I look at my own life and I see that I've done all of these things myself.

[22 : 08] And maybe you have too. And all of this reminds us that the terms for approaching God are very clear and very specific.

And that's the thing I want you to really recognize for today. And if God is there, if God is real, the terms for approaching God are very, very specific and it's really important that we recognize them. And yet humanity refuses to conform to these terms. And in all these different ways, we try to approach God on our own way.

And this is where we see that humanity is so strange. I don't mean to be insulting, saying you're all strange, but humanity in general, me and myself included, very, very strange because every day we live with uncompromising terms all around us, especially in the areas of life that are really important. So although sometimes we think, you know, the idea of uncompromising terms, we think, well, that sounds a bit harsh. But really, when it comes to important stuff, we all accept uncompromising terms and we all value uncompromising terms.

[23 : 27] For example, how many people in Britain today can get on a plane without going through security? None of them. It's uncompromising. How many unsterilized needles are allowed in an operating theater?

None. How many cars are allowed in the road without brakes? None. It's absolutely uncompromising.

And we all conform to those terms, we value those terms. And yet when it comes to God, who is more important than anything else, the whole world thinks that we can decide the standards.

We can set the terms. We can stand over God. We can work our way up to God or we can ignore God and do our own thing. And yet the truth is, we can't.

We have to come to God on very, very specific terms. And so on the picture there, it's narrow, very specific.

[24 : 32] And so that makes us ask the question, the really important question, what are God's terms? If it's none of those other things, what are the terms for approaching God? Do you have to scale the height of theological and intellectual knowledge?

So do you have to become really, really high in what you know, really high in what you understand, really high in what you achieve? Do you have to get up to this really high standard?

Or do you have to plumb the depths? Do you have to go through the deepest sorrows and hard experiences? Do you have to get all the way down to the very bottom of the pit in order to find Jesus there and bring Him up to you?

Do you have to ascend to the heavens to bring Jesus down? Do you have to go to the pit to bring Him up? No you don't. And that's what Paul makes very clear in chapter 10.

He says the righteousness which is based on faith, that is the right approach to God, is do not say in your heart who will ascend into heaven, that is to bring Christ down, or who will descend into the abyss, that is to bring Christ up from the dead.

[25 : 39] But what does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that is the word of faith we proclaim. Because 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, for there's no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord as 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.

In other words, God's terms are this, He's putting everything that you need right in front of you. Absolutely everything that you need is right in front of you. And all you have to do is trust Him. And that is the good news of the Gospel, that is the message of Christianity, that is how you approach God. So you don't stand over Him, you don't work your way up for Him, you don't wander off on your own, you come right before Him and you listen to what He says, and He says, if you trust Me, I will save you.

[27 : 07] Now, that trust in our hearts inevitably involves confession with our mouths, which what Paul speaks about there, because the two are absolutely inseparable, and that again makes perfect sense, because if you said you trusted somebody but you didn't want to talk about it, then that would be trust that's being slightly held back.

And trust that's held back is not really trust, is it? And so inevitably, you trust in Jesus, you want to confess Him and acknowledge that He is your Savior.

And that's the Gospel's terms, that Jesus has done everything, absolutely everything that is needed for your salvation, and all God asks is that we trust in Him.

And so you don't need to ascend to the heights and you don't need to reach down to the bottom of the depths, you don't need to go and find Jesus.

Because Jesus has come and found you. And He's holding salvation right in front of you. That's why Paul says the word is near you.

[28 : 23] It's in your mouth. You can read it out loud for yourself. It's in your heart. You can read it and think about it. It's right in front of you.

And it was right in front of the Israelites as well. But they pushed God away. That's what Paul says at the end of the chapter.

God says that the Israelites, all day long, I've held out my hands to disobedient and contrary people. And I think that this verse is a really important verse because it really sets before us very clearly what God's terms are.

God's terms for you approaching Him are that He's holding out His arms to you.

[29 : 24] Holding out His arms to you. And all you have to do is run to Him and trust Him.

And in the name of God, please do not be disobedient and contrary. And I think that this image of outstretched arms is really powerful and really beautiful.

And in many ways, here is where we find the biblical balance between God's sovereign election and our personal responsibility.

That's the two great truths that chapters 9 and 10 of Romans speak about. Chapter 9 tells us that God chooses those on whom He will have mercy. Chapter 10 tells us that the gospel is freely and openly offered to all.

And salvation is promised, promised to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. And we know that both of these doctrines are true and yet they can be a wee bit hard to reconcile at times.

[30 : 32] And I know that I can't explain it perfectly and there's a lot that I can't explain perfectly. And of course, that makes sense because we can't look down on God and put Him in our box and explain every single detail of what He does.

But I think in terms of trying to balance this idea of God's sovereignty and our responsibility, the idea that we're completely dependent on God and yet at the same time we're not fatalistic in saying that, well, God will do what He likes so we don't do anything.

We have a responsibility to respond to Him. In terms of that balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, I think that the image of outstretched arms, that this verse is setting before us, is really helpful.

Because when my daughter Annie was wee, I would come home and you'd come in the door and I would stretch out my arms to Annie. And everyone in here, every mum, dad, auntie, uncle, granny, even pal, friends or families will know what this is like.

You stretch out your arms and she'd run in to my arms and she'd wrap her arms around me and I would pick her up and it would be great, a great way to come home.

[31 : 45] Dads never get tired of that, by the way. You daughters here who are like 25, just go for it. Dads never get tired of that. Maybe you just don't run too fast.

So Annie runs to me, she throws her arms around me, she doesn't wait for me to go and grab her and drag her into my arms against her will. She runs to me and when she runs into my arms, she's holding me as tight as she can, but really I'm the one who's holding her.

And she knows me as her father and she runs to me, but she doesn't know everything about me, she doesn't know the whole story of my life. She can't comprehend everything about me because she's just we, but I know her and I've known every detail of her life since the day she was born.

She runs to me because she loves me, but the real truth is that she only loves me because I loved her first and she feels safe grabbing on to me thinking I'll never let go, but the real truth is that she's safe because I will never let go.

And I think in a similar way, we run to God in faith and we hold on to him, but the real truth is that he is holding us.

[33 : 12] And we know that he is God and through faith in Jesus Christ we know him as father and yet at the same time we can't comprehend everything about him, but the real truth is he knows us and he knows everything about us.

We run to him because we love him, but the real truth is he loved us first, long before we ever loved him.

And we feel safe and we think we'll never let go, but the real truth is we're safe because he will never let go of us.

And God sovereignty and our responsibility meet perfectly in the gospel. We run to God on his terms. We come to him in faith and when we do so, we discover that he's loved us from all eternity. He's chosen to make us his own and he's done everything, absolutely everything required for us to be saved.

[34 : 19] Now, if you keep away from Jesus, then that balance of sovereignty and responsibility in the gospel will be a stumbling block.

But if you run to Jesus, that stumbling block will become the cornerstone on which your whole life is built.

And it's a great reminder that we need to come to God on his terms. And God's terms are not, you need to make yourself good enough.

God's terms are not, you need to sort out your life. God's terms are not, you need to make yourself a better person. God's terms are that his arms are open and are stretched out for you.

And everything that Jesus achieved in his death and resurrection, every detail of theology that the Bible sets before us, every single element of God's great plan of salvation has been done so that God could hold his arms out to you today.

[35 : 34] It has brought you here today to hear that, that God's arms are open and all you have to do is run to him.

And that's why this chapter should make us burst with joy. The fact that no matter how broken we are, no matter how much we've mucked up in our lives, no matter how many mistakes we've made, we can run to him and everyone who calls on him will be saved.

And that's the message that the whole world needs to hear, which is why Paul says in this chapter, go, people need to hear. So we need people to preach and we need people to be sent. It is so important that we go out with this message because God's promise will never fail.

This chapter can make our hearts burst with joy, but this chapter can also make our hearts break with sorrow.

Because to push away God's open arms is the most tragic thing that anyone could ever do.

[36 : 43] And maybe you've pushed God's arms away lots of times in your life. I did. The amazing truth is that God's arms are still open.

So what's the story of your life going to be? Is God going to say all day long I've held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people or is God going to say I held out my hands and you ran in?

May that be true of us all. Amen. God our Father, we thank you for the simplicity of the Gospel. And we are all guilty of making it too complicated, we're guilty of standing over you and expecting you to do what we say. We're guilty of trying to work our way up to you thinking that our achievement is what makes us, is what's important.

And we're guilty of wandering away from you. And we want to thank you that none of these are the right way of coming to you.

[38 : 04] And that the terms of coming to you are actually the most beautiful and most simple and most wonderful. That because of Jesus Christ your arms are open.

And oh God we just thank you for that and we just want to run into your arms and never, ever, ever wander away again. God keep us and lead us and make us all your own.

In Jesus' name, amen.