

*A Stumbling Stone, Our Rock of Salvation*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 6, 2022.

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’” “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.” What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame (Romans 9:22–33).<sup>1</sup>

That God chose Israel is indisputable. It was the descendants of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, that God redeemed from Egypt, gave his law, established as a nation. What is disputed is whether all of Israel inherited the kingdom of heaven. Some would have us believe, as many first century Jews believed, that eternal life for the Jew, unlike the Gentile, is by natural descent and law-keeping. Some even go as far as to believe in a secret rapture, in which Christians are whisked away to heaven so God may deal with ethnic Israel. According to this teaching, ethnic Israel is reconstituted as a nation, temple worship restarted, sacrifices recommenced, and through obedience to God’s judicial, ceremonial, and moral law Israel will be saved. So much for the dwelling incarnation, atoning death, and life-giving resurrection of Israel’s Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What Paul reveals in his epistle to the Romans is something very different: “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Rom. 9:6-7). Though God chose natural Israel for the ultimate purpose of the coming of the Son of God, such favor did not guarantee salvation. What does is the sovereign grace of God through faith in Christ Jesus alone. Indeed, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,” but only those foreknown and predestined as “vessels of mercy, which [God] prepared beforehand for glory” (9:23).

As if this weren’t startling enough, Paul also reveals that true, spiritual Israel consists, according to God’s ordination, of more than those of Jewish ethnicity but Gentiles too. God has called both Jews and Gentiles, “and those whom he called he also justified” (Rom. 8:30), and those whom he

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

justified he adopted as children, “and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). In Christ, Jew and Gentile alike are children of God, revealing not a replacement but true Israel in Christ.

That such a reality sounds strange to some is strange indeed, since God’s Word is clear. As God revealed through the prophet Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved’” (9:25). Those who were not God’s people would become “sons of the living God” (9:26). Of course, this doesn’t mean that God has rejected all of Israel. As an Israelite, Paul is living proof of that (Rom. 11:1). Rather, God has spared not the whole but a remnant, according to his sovereign purpose.

What then is the difference between those he spared and those he didn’t? It certainly wasn’t their ethnicity or heritage, nor common patriarchs, law, worship, or nationality. In fact, given Israel’s track record of unfaithfulness, repeatedly breaking God’s covenant, but for God’s mercy they would have been wiped out like Sodom and Gomorrah (9:29). But in God’s mercy he preserved a remnant, a true Israel within Israel, to save from his wrath and imminent judgment. And in his sovereign grace he has revealed that the descendants of Abraham, the offspring of Israel, are more than a remnant of ancient Israel but a people called from every tribe, tongue, and nation, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9), a people of his mercy.

### **Receiving Mercy**

If by his eternal decree, God has foreordained some “vessels of wrath” and predestined others “vessels of mercy,” what responsibility have we? Are we merely automatons, wound up and working out our maker’s bidding? Hardly! Think about it: As God is holy, then an automation would perform accordingly, holy maker = holy robot. But we are neither, apart from Christ. In reality, “None is righteous, no, not one,” and “no one understands,” and “no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:10-11). In the freedom of our will, “no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:12). This is the case, of course, for Jew and Gentile alike: One sought righteousness through self-righteous works; the other never sought it at all. Truly, “None is righteous.”

But God is, and his standard does not deviate, as he commands, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). Our responsibility is righteousness, and we are not. Such is the human dilemma, unsolvable unless God acts. And so, he has. Rather than robots of righteousness, we were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Rather than holiness, we “lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:1-3). But in his mercy, and eternal love for us, God saved us by his grace.

But the question remains: How can a righteous God save an unrighteous people by his grace? To be righteous, we must be given righteousness, alien to us but embodied in Christ. In the Great Exchange, God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ “himself bore our sins in his body on the [cross], that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). This God has done by his grace, and this God does in us through faith. We are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, and it is

by this faith that we are justified as righteous. “What shall we say, then?” Paul asks, “That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith” (9:30).

But Gentiles are not the only ones justified as righteous by faith but Jews too. In fact, it is the qualifying characteristic of true Israel and Abraham’s offspring: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13). The Pharisees may have challenged Jesus, saying, “Abraham is our father” (John 8:39), but it was only biologically true. Spiritually, Abraham’s offspring are all who are justified as righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Or as Paul explains, Abraham believed God and it was “counted to him as righteousness,” words written not only for his sake but ours as well: “It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:22-24). Christ “became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

### **Keeping Law**

In contrast, Israel as a whole looked not to the Lord but the law for redemption, not in true worship but works of self-righteousness. As Paul put it bluntly, “if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law... You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Rom. 2:17, 23-24). The irony is the Jews went to great lengths to insure they weren’t like the Gentiles. If sincerity saves, every faithful Jew would be in heaven. But it doesn’t, because sincerity apart from the gospel of grace is hypocrisy. As Jesus said to Israel’s leaders, “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matt. 23:24, 28 NIV). As a result, they became “blind guides,” believing salvation is attained by what they could do not what God has done, and God’s law became a means of achievement rather than the revelation of God’s perfect righteousness.

Sadly, the idea that works of the law can justify a sinner as righteous is an insult to the law. The problem is not with God’s law but the law-keeper. Indeed,

“The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,

even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:7-10).

No, it’s not the righteousness of the law that is the problem but Israel’s pursuit of righteousness by works. What they pursued was never attained, because no one is justified as righteous by works but by faith alone.

Of course, works salvation is not a relic of ancient Israel’s history but is alive and thriving today. All who look to their own efforts, their own merits, their own righteousness, practice a variety of Israel’s religion. And nothing is more offensive to the works-based religion than the gospel. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22-24). He who kept the law perfectly is more than an example to follow but our Savior, whose sacrificial death and victorious resurrection secured salvation for all who look to him alone in faith. As we sing,

Not the labors of my hands  
can fulfill thy law’s demands;  
could my zeal no respite know,  
could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone;  
thou must save, and thou alone.”<sup>2</sup>

He who is a stumbling stone to the self-righteous is the rock of salvation for all who believe.

### **Stumbling over Christ**

Merging two verses into one, Paul quotes Isaiah: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (9:33). What this stone or rock was historically is left to speculation; who it is, is not. The metaphorical stone tripped up the unbelieving. What need did they have of grace when works of the law satisfied their self-righteousness.

Ironically, those through whom the promise would be fulfilled did not believe the promise. Such are the mysterious ways of our God. The people who awaited their Messiah missed him in their waiting, even stumbling over him in their pursuit. As the Apostle Peter puts it, “They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (1 Pet. 2:8), while those who were not God’s covenant people became “sons of the living God” (Rom. 9:26).

Such truth calls for humility. We could have stumbled over Christ. But for the grace of God we could have easily been offended by the gospel. Unless God had shown us mercy, we would never have known the Rock of our salvation, stumbling into eternal shame and torment. But God has

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<sup>2</sup> “Rock of Ages,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 499.

*A Stumbling Stone, Our Rock of Salvation*

shown us mercy, graciously saving all who believe in his one and only Son and promising us eternal life (John 3:16).

So, let us humbly give thanks as vessels of mercy that we who were not God's people have become his people. Let us give thanks that in his mercy and eternal love for us, he calls us his beloved. Let us give thanks that while we did not pursue the righteousness of God, by his grace he justified us as righteous through faith. And let us give thanks that he who is a stumbling stone for many is our rock of salvation. So, let us rejoice, for "The LORD liveth; and blessed be [our] rock; and let the God of [our] salvation be exalted" (Ps. 18:46 KJV).