

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 9: 30-33

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. We will continue reading Romans chapter 9. Today we will read verses 30 to 33.

God's sovereignty and human free will are not two opposing issues but work together in harmony, complementing each other. The key factor that connects these seemingly contradictory issues is God's foreknowledge. God is an all-knowing God; all things exist and are established through Him. Therefore, in His foreknowledge, God grants promises, chooses in His election, and shows mercy.

Paul is a meticulous and logical debater. When discussing God's sovereignty, he emphasizes that God, as the Creator, naturally has absolute sovereignty over all that He has created. Therefore, he deliberately avoids mentioning human free will and the responsibilities that arise from it, instead embedding human responsibility within the examples he provides.

If we read the scriptures only on the surface without delving into their deeper meaning, we easily fall into biased and dogmatic assertions, portraying God as a despotic tyrant. In fact, this is contrary to God's attributes of love and justice. God, in His love, sacrificed His only beloved Son to satisfy His righteous nature. God does not favor one attribute over another but achieves His righteousness through His sacrificial, infinite, and eternal love. Paul's discourse is balanced, but you must read his entire argument to see this.

When emphasizing God's sovereignty, Paul directly points out that humans have no standing or position to accuse God. Paul's purpose is to teach people humility, for God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Paul hopes that people will humble themselves to receive God's salvation. After completing his discourse on God's sovereignty, starting from Romans 9:30, Paul shifts to human responsibility.

God is the One who does all things according to His will, and He has no obligation to explain His motives or reasons to humanity.

Even so, from God's promise to Abraham, His election of Jacob, and His mercy toward Moses, we can still see human responsibility, though it is hidden within these examples. However, starting from Romans 9:30, Paul directly addresses human responsibility through the examples of Gentiles being justified by faith and Israelites stumbling.

Verse 30: "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith."

"What shall we say then?" follows Paul's preceding discourse. The Gentiles, who were not originally God's people, became those loved by God, accepted as His people, and called sons of the living God in Christ. Meanwhile, the Israelites, who were God's chosen people in the Old Testament, in the New Testament era of salvation by grace, are only a remnant among the multitude like the sand of the sea. In the Old Testament, Israel was God's firstborn, but in the New Testament, they fell behind. Christ is God's firstborn, and the church, as Christ's body, has taken Israel's place as God's firstborn. Thus, Paul asks, "What shall we say then?" This is God's will and plan. God has sovereignty, and humans have no right to question it. The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained righteousness.

Righteousness is an attribute of God, and the Gentiles were far from qualifying for God's righteousness. They did not pursue righteousness, yet they attained it—the righteousness of faith. The word for "pursue" here is a vivid Greek word, *dioko*, meaning "aggressively chased like a hunter pursuing a catch," a strong pursuit like a hunter chasing prey. In English, it is translated as "pursue," a word that can be positive or negative—positive as pursuit, negative as persecution.

Pursuit and persecution are essentially the same act, viewed from different perspectives. For example, if a brother likes a sister and begins to pursue her, for the brother, it is pursuing the one he loves. But for the sister, if she has no interest

in him, his pursuit becomes persecution to her. This is a strong word: strong pursuit can also be strong persecution.

Paul was very aware of this because, before he knew the Lord, he persecuted those who followed Him, yet to him, he thought he was serving God, pursuing God. The Gentiles did not pursue God's righteousness, yet they attained it. The Greek word for "attained," *katalambanō*, is also interesting, composed of two parts: *kata*, meaning "intensify," and *lamano*, meaning "take hold of." Thus, it means to seize strongly, to grasp tightly, to obtain at a cost. It seems illogical that those who did not pursue attained it and grasped it tightly. Therefore, Paul immediately adds that it is the righteousness of faith. In other words, the Gentiles paid no price at all; Christ had already paid the immense price. They did not pursue righteousness but simply believed in Jesus Christ and firmly attained God's righteousness.

Righteousness is an attribute of God, and humans cannot pursue it because it is based on God's standard, far beyond human ability. But Jesus Christ has accomplished salvation, and we only need to believe to have Christ as our lifelong Savior. When we attain Christ, we naturally attain Christ's righteousness, for righteousness is an attribute of Christ.

Those who did not pursue righteousness attained it, which seems like a paradox on the surface. But in reality, as long as we attain Christ, we attain all that belongs to Christ—what glorious grace! When we accepted salvation, we never imagined that salvation would be so rewarding. Thus, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." Such rich and glorious grace is fully attained through simple belief.

Verse 31: "But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness."

In contrast, the Israelites pursued the law of righteousness. The Chinese Union Version's translation is not very accurate; English versions, based on the original

text, translate it as “the law of righteousness.” The law was given by God through Moses, and the law testifies to God; thus, its essence is righteousness.

The Israelites truly pursued the law, compiling and organizing the scriptures related to the law into 613 legal statutes and striving to obey them in their lives. They earnestly pursued the law, even to the point of persecuting those who did not keep it—Paul himself did this before his salvation.

They pursued the law of righteousness but did not attain it. The Chinese Union Version’s translation of “has not attained” is also inaccurate because Paul uses a different Greek word here, *phthno*, meaning “arrive.” A better translation would be “failed to reach the law” or “failed to meet the law’s requirements.” The Israelites strove to reach the law but could not meet its demands.

The Israelites completely misunderstood God’s original intent in giving the law. In Romans 3:20, it says, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” God knew from the beginning that humans could not fully keep the law. James 2:10 tells us that if you break one part of the law, you are guilty of breaking all of it.

Thus, God’s intent in giving the law was to make people aware of sin. Once you know you are sinful, you seek forgiveness. Only by accepting Jesus Christ’s redemption can sins be forgiven; thus, the law leads people to Christ. So Paul says in Romans 10:4, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” The Israelites pursued the law but failed to reach it because they did not see that the end of the law is Christ; they needed to pursue Christ.

Verse 32: “Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.”

In this verse, Paul tells us the reason: because they did not seek it by faith, but by the works of the law. The Greek preposition for “by,” *ek*, means “out of” or “from.” If translated directly, it means their pursuit was not out of faith but out of works.

God highly values the source. Human actions can have two sources: led by the Holy Spirit or stemming from the flesh and natural inclinations. For those who are not yet saved by grace, they do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit, so their actions cannot come from the Spirit.

Thus, for unbelievers, their good deeds may come from their natural inclinations, where the mind naturally has concepts of doing good—this is one possibility. Alternatively, they may stem from fleshly desires, using good deeds to gain reputation or other benefits. Whether from natural inclinations or the flesh, these good deeds have little value and cannot be brought into eternity. Such partial or self-interested good deeds cannot offset the sins committed by failing to meet the law's requirements. Only actions from faith, initiated by the Holy Spirit and accompanied by human obedience, align with God's will and are acceptable to Him.

In Philippians 3:9, Paul says, "and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith." (NKJV) Here, Paul tells us that being found in Christ is not about righteousness from the law but righteousness through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God. The Israelites wanted to meet the law's requirements through works, but they stumbled at the stumbling stone. What is this stumbling stone? Paul explains next.

Verse 33: "As it is written: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.'"

"As it is written" refers to Isaiah 8:14-15 and Isaiah 28:16. In Isaiah 8, which speaks of the Assyrian Empire attacking Israel like a surging flood, God establishes a sanctuary to protect those who trust in Him.

For those who trust in other powers, Isaiah 8:14-15 says, "He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble;

they shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken.” This sanctuary established by God becomes a stumbling stone and a rock of offense to many Israelites.

In Isaiah 28:16, it describes those who trust in God: “Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not act hastily.’”

1 Peter 2:6-8 combines these two passages: “Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.’ Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’ They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.”

Peter clearly states that this stone is Christ. For those who believe, He is the chief cornerstone, and we come to the Lord as living stones to be built into a spiritual house. But for those who do not believe, Christ becomes a stumbling stone and a rock of offense. Those who believe in Him will not be put to shame.

Dear brothers and sisters, whether Christ is a protective rock or a stumbling stone depends entirely on whether we believe or not. From the moment we accept salvation, for those who believe, Christ is the protective rock; for those who do not believe, He is the stumbling stone.

For the Jews, this initial faith was not easy because, in their traditional understanding, anyone hung on a tree was cursed. Thus, they struggled to accept that Jesus, crucified on the cross, was the Messiah. They did not see that Jesus was crucified for their sins, nor did they believe that He rose on the third day and ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. The crucified Jesus became their stumbling stone.

After Jesus was born, Mary brought Him to the temple in Jerusalem, where they met Simeon. Simeon said to Mary, as recorded in Luke 2:34-35, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be

spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” (NKJV) Simeon’s words—that Jesus would cause many in Israel to fall and many to rise—were fulfilled for the unbelieving Israelites, as Jesus became their stumbling stone.

But for us, chosen by God and granted the wisdom to believe in Jesus Christ, He is our saving rock. How blessed we are! However, as we walk the path of sanctification in our daily lives, we must continually experience Christ: when we trust in Him, He becomes our saving rock; when we stray from Him, He becomes our stumbling stone.

Dear brothers and sisters, may we see that the Father prepares many circumstances for us each day—some bring joy, some bring difficulty. The Father’s purpose is to turn us to Christ, for those who believe in Him will not be put to shame. If our life plans exclude Christ, He will become our stumbling stone, causing us to fall so that we turn to Him; then He becomes our saving rock. When we face life’s storms, if we turn to Christ, He can save us as our saving rock. When we enjoy life’s ease and drift from Christ, He becomes our stumbling stone, reminding us to seek Him after we stumble, and He becomes our saving rock.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You! Thank You for, through Paul, writing Romans Chapter 9, enabling us to find harmony and complementarity between God’s sovereignty and our free will. On one hand, it helps us understand God’s sovereignty; on the other hand, it reminds us of our own responsibility. Since we have entered by faith and been justified by God, we ask You to help us continue to walk the path of sanctification by faith. In our daily lives, may we recognize God’s leading in His sovereignty on one hand and, on the other hand, choose to obey God’s sovereign leading through our free will. May we fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ, and He will be our saving rock. Bless our daily lives. We pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ.