

Romans 9:30-33

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Righteousness can only be gained one way: through faith. The Gentiles (people who are non-Jewish) found righteousness through faith, even though they were not looking for it. Many of the Jewish people pursued righteousness through following rules, not through faith, so they did not find righteousness.

These verses tie directly to the theme verse of Romans 1:16–17; righteousness only comes one way, and that is through faith, from beginning to end. Righteousness begins by faith in Jesus, and that makes us righteous in God’s sight; we become a child of God’s just by believing (John 3:14-15). It continues in our daily living—walking by faith daily brings righteousness into our experience.

Paul has brought up the rhetorical question *What shall we say then?* in his letter to the Roman believers four different times already (Romans 4:1, 6:1, 8:31, 9:14). He is using this question in verse 30 to raise and answer an objection likely raised by the competing Jewish “authorities.” From the context of Chapter 9, we might infer that *What shall we say then?* is intended to apply to the overall question of God’s relationship with His people Israel. Since God has now accepted Gentiles, what does that mean for Jews?

That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith (v 30).

It seems the main point is that Jews were looking for but did not find righteousness because they were looking in the wrong place—they were looking to gain righteousness through the *law*. On the other hand, Gentiles were not particularly looking for righteousness, but they found it anyway because they believed.

How did the Gentile believers come to righteousness? Paul answers that it is through faith that the believing Gentiles attained God’s righteousness.

This is somewhat of a culmination, because the main question this letter asks and answers is “What is righteousness, and how is it gained?” The Greek word translated “righteousness” is “dikaiosune.” It can also be translated as “justice” as is typical in English translations of Plato’s “Republic,” which also asks and answers the same question, “What is righteousness/justice and how can it be gained?” Interestingly, Paul and Plato come up with similar definitions of righteousness/justice—each proposes it to be the harmony of people working together for a common cause and mutual benefit.

Plato uses the illustration of a Greek city-state where each person does what they do best for the betterment of the entire community. Paul uses the illustration of a body, where each part does what it does best for the betterment of the entire body. Paul speaks of exercising gifts to serve others (Romans 12:4-8).

Where Plato and Paul differ dramatically is in definition of who is the head, the leader. Paul asserts that the head or leader of the body is Christ; we even become members of the body by being in Christ (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 1:22-23). Plato designates a certain theoretical noble class of humans as “guardians.” Paul might agree in principle, but would definitely assert that no human lives up to Plato’s standard of guardianship other than Jesus Christ, the God-man (Romans 3:10, 23-24; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Paul has asserted that righteousness is gained by faith from beginning to end (Romans 1:17). We are justified (made righteous in God’s sight) by believing on Jesus on the cross (Romans 3:23-24; 4,1-3; John 3:14-15). We can live in a righteous manner by walking in faith, believing that God’s way is for our best rather than living in pride, thinking we know best (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:16-17). The Gentiles stumbled into righteousness, it seems, because they believed. They were not seeking to live in harmony with God’s (good) design, but ended up doing so because they believed on Jesus, and have been following His ways.

The Gentiles did not pursue God’s righteousness, but God made Himself known to the Gentiles (Romans 10:20) and they believed. Because they believed, they became righteous before God through faith and were therefore adopted into the family and righteousness of God.

As they walked in faith, they experienced righteousness in their daily living. This occurred even though righteousness wasn’t something that they were seeking, but nonetheless God revealed it to them.

On the other hand, *Israel* (the Jewish people) was *pursuing a law of righteousness* (v 31), deliberately seeking to be righteous in the sight of God. But they failed to find *righteousness*, because they were not seeking it by faith. They were seeking it through the Law. When we seek to be justified through the Law it leads to a self-focus, as we compare ourselves to various rules and standards as well as comparing ourselves to others.

The Jewish people sought to pursue righteousness through their own actions, like obeying religious rules, and not through faith. As a result, they did not gain righteousness. *Israel... did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works* (v 32). No one can live up to God’s standard, as Paul made clear in Romans 3:10, 23-25.

In verses 31–33, Paul is telling the Roman believers that it is the same for both the Jews and the Gentiles—both must come to righteousness through faith or not come to it at all. Righteousness is referring to harmonious and right living, living as God designed us to. This righteousness is tied to our justification (which comes from believing that Christ died on the cross for our sins) and our sanctification (living as God wants us to; harmonious and right-living).

Paul is referring to righteousness as both justification and sanctification, each necessary to live a righteous, harmonious life. When believers are justified through faith in Jesus they receive the power of the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit, which gives us the power to walk in righteousness as we follow the Spirit in faith (Romans 1:16-17; Galatians 5:13-18).

Paul tells us that the Jews attempted to come to this righteousness through their own actions, like following religious rules. Paul makes it clear in verse 33, where he quotes Isaiah from the Old Testament, that Jesus is the *stumbling stone* for the Jewish people. *They stumbled over the*

stumbling stone, just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed" (v 33).

Jesus came to Israel as the cornerstone upon which a restored kingdom could be constructed, the promised messianic kingdom of the throne of David (2 Samuel 7:12-13). This cornerstone was God's suffering servant, the fulfillment of that which was pictured by Joseph (Isaiah 53:11). This cornerstone was God's fulfillment of His promise to send a prophet like Moses who would speak words directly to the people in a manner they could hear (Deuteronomy 18:18).

This cornerstone was the Son of David, who God sent to restore the kingdom to Israel (Matthew 1:1). But Israel did not recognize its visitation (Luke 19:44). So this cornerstone became a *stone of stumbling and a rock of offense*.

Paul quotes two verses from the Old Testament showing that the rejection of Israel was predicted. The verse, *Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed* quotes Isaiah 28:16.

Zion is a term used to refer to Israel, since Mount Zion is a prominent mount upon which Jerusalem is located. Paul asserts that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction, and this fulfillment has resulted in Israel's rejection of their messiah for the time being. Israel has rejected Jesus, the messiah. The cornerstone intended to be the foundation of a new kingdom has become a stumbling stone.

However, even though some have rejected, whoever *believes in Him will not be disappointed*. There is a remnant of Jews who will believe (Romans 9:27). And they will *not be disappointed* because they will be saved by grace, through faith (Ephesians 8-9).

To attain righteousness, God requires faith in His Son, Jesus. Jesus described to Nicodemus that just as the bronze snake in the wilderness was lifted up on a pole, that whoever looked at the snake would be delivered from dying from venomous snake bites, so it would be that Jesus would be "lifted up." Jesus was "lifted up" on a cross so that whoever believed in Him would be delivered from the poisonous venom of sin and be given eternal life (John 3:14-15). This provides a new spiritual birth (John 3:3). This is the starting place for a new birth in Christ.

But the Jewish people have not believed. Rather, they have pursued their own righteousness through the Law. Therefore, Jesus has become a stumbling stone for them rather than the cornerstone. They fall over Him, He is an obstacle in their way, because they have pursued righteousness through their own actions, rather than faith.

Biblical Text

³⁰ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law. ³² Why? Because *they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were* by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ just as it is written,

**"Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,
And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed."**