**Introduction**

In Romans chapter nine Paul is discussing some problems-connected with salvation.

If a person is saved by grace alone, though faith alone, in Christ alone, what about the Jew? What about the Jewish people, and the Jewish law and the Jewish religion?

Paul’s concern could easily apply to anyone who wonders about religion, any religion, all religions. If Jesus Christ alone is the only way to have a right relationship with God—what are we going to do with all the religions in the world? Aren’t we going to be accused of being intolerant or arrogant? My friend Franklin Graham came under severe attack this week. A New York Times article read in part, “Nine months after calling Islam “a very evil and wicked religion,” the evangelist Franklin Graham said yesterday that Muslims had not sufficiently apologized for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and they should help compensate victims’ families.” At the end of the article a spokesperson for the Council on American-Islamic Relations said, “Mainstream political leaders and religious figures must speak out against the growing demonization of Islam by extremist right-wing commentators and by representatives of the evangelical Christian community. Defamatory attacks on other faiths can only lead to a spiral of distrust and intolerance that will divide our society along religious lines.” (www.nytimes.com/2002/08/15; article by Michael Wilson)

In Romans nine Paul is not simply struggling with theological issues of academic interest. Paul is a Jew. Paul is a rabbi. Paul is a Pharisee. Paul has grown up in a religious tradition rich in heritage, rich in relationships, rich in revelation. Paul spoke of those privileges in verses 4-5 “to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants etc”.

I grew up in a religious tradition rich in heritage, rich in relationships, rich in revelation. How do you walk away from such a heritage? How do you redefine past relationships with people who grew up in the same religious tradition?

Paul argues true Israel is an elect seed, not a natural seed. God saves people on the basis of His faithfulness (vv.6-13) and His justice (vv.14-18) and His righteousness (vv.19-29). God’s faithfulness is not based on race, blood or family. Paul could have easily said, “I was born a Jew, I will live a Jew I will die a Jew.” God’s election is not based on natural descent (vv.6-10). God’s acceptance is not based on human merit (vv.11-13). Paul argues God chose Jacob before either boy was even born, before their character or conduct was ever known. God has a plan. God’s plan to bring redemption, salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation in Jesus Christ does not depend on human merit. Israel’s disobedience, Israel’s rebellion and resistance could not prevent Christ from being born.

**People Who Look For Grace In Law (v.30)**
Paul presents a paradox. The Jews who were looking for salvation did not find it. The Gentiles who weren’t even looking—found it!

So much for seeker services.

Why? Israel sought salvation by keeping the law. In other words, Israel sought to be saved by works and not by grace!

Romans 9:30 (NLT)
30 Well then, what shall we say about these things? Just this: The Gentiles have been made right with God by faith, even though they were not seeking him.

“. . .Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith” (NKJV).

“. . .but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness” (NKJV).

The word translated “attained” in verse 30 and the word translated “attained” in verse 31 are two different Greek words. In verse 31 the word is katelaben. It means “grasped”, “seized”, “overtook”. The second word is ephthasen. The word means, “arrived at”. One Bible scholar noted “The meaning is subastantially the same, only the imagery in the words differs; the former being that of laying hold of a prize, and the latter arriving at a goal” (quoted in Word Meanings in The New Testament by Ralph Earle p.194).

The Gentiles were able to lay hold of the prize while the Jew have never arrived at the goal. If Judaism is a journey that leads to God’s Messiah—and Jesus is that Messiah, most Jews have not arrived!

The key word in verse 30 is righteousness.

The word ‘righteousness’ means the character or quality of being right or just. It was formerly spelled ‘rightwiseness’ and when applied to the Lord usually meant having a character or rightness consistent with God’s character.


In Numbers 15 the story is told of a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day. The Lord God commanded that the man be stoned to death. God had a zero tolerance policy toward sin.

Habakkuk 1:13 (NKJV)
13 You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness.

Hebrews 12:14 (NKJV)
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14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

God’s standard is perfect. But we human beings rebel against God’s absolute standard of perfection and holiness. We must diminish it. Why? So we can attain it through our own efforts!

How are we to reconcile God’s justice, God’s holiness and God’s love? The Lord God Himself will have to make a provision for us—Jesus Christ the Lord. This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. The gospel of Jesus Christ upholds God’s absolute holiness. All other religions must deny or diminish to disregard God’s holiness. The Christian gospel affirms God has completed the work of salvation on our behalf through Jesus Christ. And when I say complete—I mean complete. All other religions must include some form of human effort. Even within so-called Christianity there are groups who claim you are saved through Jesus Christ plus—and you fill in the blank!

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers full assurance. Every other religion offers no assurance! Every other religion must with Bono say, “We still haven’t found what we’re looking for!”

The Gentiles hear the gospel of grace and receive Jesus Christ the Lord. John’s gospel says, “not that we loved God, but that he loved us”.

Romans 1:17 (NKJV)
17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)
8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,
9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

People Who Find Grace Apart from the Law (v.31)

Romans 9:31 (NLT)
31 But the Jews, who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law, never succeeded.

What does Paul mean? Did the Jews try to get right with God by keeping the law, and then fail to keep the law? Did the Jews try to get right with God by keeping the law? In other words, does keeping the rules and regulations make you have a right relationship with God?

Let’s say someone argues—“God gave us the Law and expected us to keep it. Therefore, if a person keeps the Law, that person has a right relationship with God.”
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This is all well and good in the realm of the hypothetical, but the truth is—no one keeps the Law. The Law is more than external observance. The Law is concerned about the internal heart. Jesus proved over and over again in the New Testament, those people who thought they were righteous by observing the rules and regulations had actually failed in the most fundamental areas of attitude. “I never killed anyone”. But have you hated your brother in your heart? So what is the purpose of the Law? After all Jesus said,

Matthew 5:18 (NKJV)
18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

The Scriptures show us that God’s Law functions in at least three ways. The first way is serve as a mirror reflecting God’s perfect righteousness and our sinfulness and shortcomings. The Law gives us knowledge of sin and shows us our need for pardon and our danger of damnation. This is supposed to lead us to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Another function of the Law is to restrain evil. The Law cannot change the heart but the law can to some extent inhibit or retard lawlessness by its threats of judgment. In other words the Law provides the basic moral standards to make social interaction possible to protect the righteous from the unjust. Another function of the Law is to guide the regenerate or provide direction for the saved community—as to God’s will, good works, and God’s plans. The Law tells God’s children what pleases Him. The Christian is free from the law as a supposed system of salvation but we are under Christ’s law (Gal. 6:2) as our rule of life (see J.I. Packer in Concise Theology pp.94-95).

We diminish God’s holiness to make salvation more obtainable. But oddly enough, when we have a works based theology—we lose assurance! I want you to note something. Every system of works-based righteousness, the more that salvation is based or dependent on our effort, the less assurance we will have that we have attained it!

Yet if we affirm God’s holiness, if we affirm our inability to keep God’s law, if we must of neccessity throw ourselves on God’s grace and mercy and love in order to receive salvation, we have complete confidence or assurance. If our salvation is dependent of God and God alone, on his faithfulness and justice, on his offer of redemption in Christ, our assurance thermometer begins to rise!

Is the concept of grace and grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, present in any other religion? Does God’s grace appear in any other non-Christian religion?

I want to suggest something to you. The concept of grace is mentioned in a number of other religions, but is always redefined in some way to mean human effort!

“In Islam, for example, the phrase “those who believe appears frequently in the Qur’an. Such a phrase sounds similar to the Christian phrase “salvation by faith.” But the phrase “those who believe” is usually accompanied with “and do good deeds.” The emphasis,
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then, is placed on salvation being earned through human merit” (see The Compact Guide to World Religions edited by Dean C. Halverson p.28).

The Big Rock In The Middle Of the Road (vv.32-33)

Romans 9:32-33 (NLT)
32 Why not? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law and being good instead of by depending on faith. They stumbled over the great rock in their path.
33 God warned them of this in the Scriptures when he said, “I am placing a stone in Jerusalem that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who believes in him will not be disappointed.”

Who is the rock of offense? Jesus Christ the Lord.

The verb ‘stumbled’ is very interesting. It is the Greek word proskopto. It means to strike (in the sense of one’s hand or foot) against something.

I was born with a congenital birth defect. I have a shortened Achilles tendon. This defect means the tendon does not stretch very well. It is difficult to walk flat footed. So I walk on my toes. My son Anthony has the same problem. He walks on the balls of his feet. As I child walking bare-footed I was always stubbing my toes. My two big toes were almost always scabbed over from the cuts and scrapes. This word is very much like that— it means stumble—stumbled—it carries with it the idea of slamming into an object much harder than you which results in a cut, a wound, a scrape, an injury.

Have you ever tried to walk in the dark? Have you ever stubbed your toe?

The Jewish people kept stubbing their collective toes on Jesus!

What do you do if you keep tripping over an object? You move the object! What if the object won’t budge? Then you put little rubber or Styrofoam bumpers on the object so it won’t hurt so badly when you brush up against it.

That is what world religions have done to Jesus. They have put theological bumpers on Jesus to make it easier when you crash into the greatest rock in the history of humanity.

Many Jewish people believe the Messiah will be a human being who is not God. “This Messiah will restore the Jewish kingdom and extend his righteous rule over the earth. He will execute judgment and right all wrongs” (The Compact Guide to World Religions; chart p.126). Some Jews believe the Messiah is a kind of collective consciousness of the Jews themselves. Some don’t believe in a personal messiah—but rather a kind of utopian age called the messianic age.

The Jewish scriptures declare that the Messiah will be from the seed of Abraham (Gen. 18:18; Isaac (21:12); Jacob (Numbers 24:17, 19); Judah (Genesis 49:10); Jesse (Isaiah
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11:1-2, 10) David (Jeremiah 23:5-6). “Jesus. . .the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham (Luke 3:31-33).

The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic.5:2). The Messiah would be despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3). He would be “a man of sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3) and “familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3).

Isaiah 53:7-11 (NLT)
7 He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearsers, he did not open his mouth.
8 From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins—that he was suffering their punishment?
9 He had done no wrong, and he never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man’s grave.
10 But it was the Lord’s good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have a multitude of children, many heirs. He will enjoy a long life, and the Lord’s plan will prosper in his hands.
11 When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.

Psalm 118:22 (NLT)
22 The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone.

Isaiah 8:14 (NLT)
14 He will keep you safe. But to Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap that entangles them.

1 Peter 2:4-8 (NKJV)
4 Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious,
5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
6 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.”
7 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,”
8 and “A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

Jesus is the Living Stone (1 Peter 2:4). Why? Because He is the living God. He is the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6-7). The cornerstone unites the building—and Jesus unites the church. Jesus unites all that God is doing in the affairs of human beings. If the cornerstone is off, so is the building. Jesus is the chosen stone (1 Peter 2:4,6)—this means the select stone or the stone selected for something special. Jesus Christ is unique.

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of meeting a lady at the Christian Booksellers Convention. She introduced the guy with her as a very special person. He claimed to be Jesus Christ the Lord. He had long dirty hair and a grungy beard. Dr. Wiersbe reached out for one of his hands and remarked, “There are no nail prints here, so you are not Jesus Christ. You are a phoney!”
Conclusion

Many people struggle with Jesus. Some people suggest that all religions are equally true. It might be argued that all religions may contain some truth, it cannot be argued logically or factually that all religions are equally true. Some people think, in order to foster mutual respect among followers of different religions that we must disregard the differences. The truth is there are real and irreconcilable differences that exist among different religions. Such a belief is irrational. In order for this idea to be true, then the opposite idea would also have to be true. Some religions teach ‘all religions are equally true’ and others teach only their belief is true. One cannot hold the belief that all religions are true unless you change the meaning of the word ‘true’ of its generally accepted meaning. When we say ‘true’ we mean something that corresponds to reality. Something as simple as a contrast and comparison between Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity on the nature of ultimate reality will show the absurdity of such a belief. Hinduism believes in an impersonal essence; or many gods. Buddhism denies the existence of a personal God but affirms an impersonal Buddha essence. Islam teaches Allah is the Creator God, radically monotheistic and unknowable. Christianity teaches a Creator who is personal and who has made himself known.

In a recent NCAA cross-country championship held in Riverside, California, 123 of the 128 runners missed a turn. One competitor, Mike Delcavo, stayed on the 10,000-meter course and began waving for fellow runners to follow him. Delcavo was able to convince only four other runners to go with him. Asked what his competitors thought of his mid-race decision not to follow the crowd, Delcavo responded, "They thought it was funny that I went the right way."

Delcavo was one who ran correctly. In the same way, our goal is to run correctly—to finish the race marked out for us by Christ. We can rejoice over those who have courage to follow, ignoring the laughter of the crowd. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness ..." (2 Tim. 4:7-8).


Has anyone ever accused you of being arrogant because you believe Jesus Christ alone is the only way to have a right relationship with God? Ask them to define what arrogance means? Does arrogance mean holding a belief that is exclusive of other beliefs?

By the way, arrogance is defined as offensive exhibition of assumed or real superiority; overbearing pride”(Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language).

People need love, especially when they don't deserve it.
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