

ROMANS XXXVI: THE STUMBLING STONE

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INTRODUCTION:

Why is the issue of faith and works so complicated? The answer is that it is not—it is the sinful human heart that is complicated. Because of that, we take something straightforward—trust God in all things—and tie it up into knots. But the issues outside the heart are simple. They binary. Either you will build your life on the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ, or that same stone will fall on you and crush you ([Luke 20:17-18](#)).

THE TEXT:

"What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumbling stone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" ([Rom 9:30-33](#)).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

What do we say in response to the argument from Hosea and Isaiah? Our conclusion is that the Gentiles, who were not chasing righteousness, have nevertheless attained that righteousness (v. 30). The righteousness they attained to is the righteousness that is "of faith" (v. 30). Israel in the meantime was chasing after righteousness and did not catch it (v. 31). The righteousness they did not catch was something they missed because they did not understand the "law of righteousness" (v. 31). The law of righteousness is faith. This is made plain in the next verse—why did they not attain what they were chasing? Because they did not chase by faith, but rather by works of the Torah (v. 32). They tripped over the stumbling stone, and this issue of faith/works was that stone (v. 32). The quotation is from both [Isaiah 8:14](#) and [28:16](#). In Isaiah 8, God sets the rock of stumbling (v. 14), and in verse 17 we see the right response to that stone, which is *trust*. Moreover, verse 17 is quoted in [Heb. 2:13](#). And in [Isaiah 28:16](#), the precious cornerstone is the one which, if someone *trusts* in it, they will never be dismayed. This verse is also quoted in [I Pet. 2:6](#) and later in [Romans 10:11](#). This is a stone of stumbling and it is a stone in which we are to trust—see the flow of the argument in [I Peter. 2:6-8](#).

LINE ON LINE:

We know from the teaching of the New Testament that the stone of stumbling and the basic foundation stone are the same stone—Jesus Christ. The stone was rejected by the appointed builders, and so they in turn were rejected. But we must pay attention not only to the fact of their rejection of Christ, but must pay close attention to the nature of their rejection of Christ.

In Isaiah 8, the stone is a stone of stumbling. In Isaiah 28, it is a cornerstone, one in which we are invited to trust. But there are some other things in Is. 28 as well. Isaiah rebukes the people for their sin (vv. 1-8). They react to him—who is Isaiah trying to teach? Sunday School kids who can't even read yet (vv. 8-9)? What they think is beneath them is actually way ahead of them. Then v. 11 is quoted in [I Cor. 14:21](#), and applied to the gift of tongues ([Dt. 28:49](#)). So then, Isaiah says, you despise the abcs? 'I'll give it to you that way (v. 13)—so that you will fall backward, be broken, snared, and captured. But the one who trusts in the stone will be blessed (v. 16). The gift of tongues was therefore a sign of judgment on unbelievers, particularly unbelieving *Jews* ([I Cor. 14:22](#)).

FAITH IS A PAIR OF EYES:

In religious affairs there can be a vast difference between what you are doing and what you think you are doing. In our text, the Jews were "following after" the law of righteousness and, when they got there, they discovered it was actually the law of unrighteousness. The Gentiles who did not have a thought of righteousness at all found themselves tackled from behind by that righteousness. Found by God, they found they had faith in Him. Pursuing God with all their hearts, or so they thought, the Jews found that they did not have faith in God. They had faith in their way of having faith in God. The Torah was not intended for that use, but that is the use they put to it. And so when Christ came, they could do nothing but stumble over Him. Faith in faith, faith in your way of having faith, is damnable. Faith is a pair of eyes, designed to look at Christ. If they don't see *Him*, they are blind eyes.

THE NATURE OF STUMBLING:

Take two men. One says that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone, by faith alone, plus nothing or no one else. Is he right? Of course he is right. But suppose he says this, not trusting in Jesus but rather trusting in his correct doctrinal formulation. He is lost, precisely because his formulation is correct. And flip it around. Another man can have a true heart-felt trust in Christ, but have been taught a real mishmash of doctrinal incoherencies. Can he be saved? Yes, but only because what he was taught is *wrong*. Was the Torah false doctrine? No, as we will see in [Romans 10:6](#). Did God know that men would get it backwards? Yes, and He planned to use this as a way of bringing men to real faith ([Rom. 10:5](#)).

SO TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST:

You were lost in sin, and Jesus Christ was sent to die on the cross in such a way as to deal with all that sin. *All* of it. He was buried, and then raised to life again so that you could participate in that eternal life. Look to Him. That's it—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for screwed up people. That's the gospel. Don't look to Him while holding your mouth just so. Don't trust in Him and in your church volunteer work. Don't believe in Him coupled with your mastery of the Westminster Confession. We are saved by grace, not law. We are saved by grace, not refined law, not doctrinal law, not the *law* of righteousness. No, we are justified by the law of *righteousness*, which is faith.



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