

## ROMANS XXXIX: AND HEARING BY THE WORD OF GOD

Douglas Wilson

Christ Church - Moscow, ID

A.D. November 8, 2009

### INTRODUCTION:

In this portion of Romans, we start to see the intersection of two realities—decretal realities and covenantal realities. This will come to full flower in the next chapter, but we see it begin here. God is utterly sovereign, and rightly understood, this means that when He chooses to use created instruments to accomplish His purposes, we do not have the right to give Him any backchat about it.

### THE TEXT:

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? . . .” (Rom 10:14-21).

### SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

In chapter 8, we considered the golden chain of redemption at the divine level—predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Here we have another glorious, redemptive chain—sending, preaching, hearing, believing, and calling (vv. 14-15). The beautiful feet of the gospel messenger is an image taken from Is. 52:7. But the beautiful message is not always beautifully received—just a few verses later, Isaiah laments the lack of faith (v. 16; Is. 53:1). Nevertheless, faith still comes by hearing, and hearing by the (sent and preached) word of God (v. 17). But there are two kinds of hearing—the one that leads to believing and calling on the Lord, and the other that leads to hardening. Did not the unbelieving Israelites hear? Yes, after a fashion (v. 18; Ps. 19:4). Paul asks the question again—surely Israel did hear in some way (v. 19). Yes, of course, (v. 19; Dt. 32:21). In contrast, Isaiah boldly prophesies that God would be found by Gentiles who weren’t looking for Him (v. 20; Is. 65:1). And at the same time, God was rejected by Israel (v. 21; Is. 65:2), that same Israel that pretended to be pursuing Him.

### A LINE OF QUOTATIONS:

In this brief passage, Paul quotes six passages from the Old Testament—four from Isaiah, one from Psalms, and one from Deuteronomy. The first shows a division in Israel (Is. 52:7). In the chapter immediately before the glorious statement of Christ’s substitutionary death, we see Israel divided between those who blaspheme (Is. 52:5) and those who burst into songs of joy (Is. 52:9). On the threshold of the greatest statement of the gospel in the Old Testament, Isaiah laments the fact that no one believes him (Is. 53:1). This is quoted more fully in John 12:38, and is based on God striking Israel with a judicial blindness (John 12:39-41; Is. 6:10). Isaiah sees the glory of God in Christ and is told to tell Israel that they do not and cannot see (Jn. 12:39, 41). So did the Jews not see at all? No, they saw, but did so the way all men see the general revelation of God—suppressing the truth about what they see even as they see (Rom. 1: 20). The glory of God is revealed through the whole creation (Ps. 19:4), and this is explicitly compared to the Torah in that psalm (Ps. 19:7ff). He then appeals to the Song of Moses, in which Moses makes the Israelites include a song in their liturgy that prophesies that they will be provoked to envy by Gentiles (Dt. 32:21). In order to be provoked by Gentiles finding God, the Israelites would have to see those Gentiles finding God. Moses also made them sing an invitation to the Gentiles (Dt. 32:43), an invitation cited by Paul a little bit later (Rom. 15:10). So did they see? Of course they did, but only enough to condemn them. Isaiah prophesies that the Gentiles will come (Is. 65:1), and that the Jews would refuse, despite God’s grace to them (Is. 65:2).

## ENVY AND THE GOSPEL:

There is no way successfully to avoid seeing Christ, but there are two ways to see Him. Envy has more twists and turns than simple faith does, and this is often because envy has a sharper eye, and sees more, even though it does not want to. The attitude we should have in looking to God and His Word for our direction (Ps. 123:2) is the kind of sharp eye for detail that drives the envious. The envious who hate Christ are often far more aware than we are of the import of Christ. But note: the energy that sinful envy provides is something that God is most willing to use (v. 19). God is made jealous by idolatry among His covenant people (Dt. 32:21) and so He pours out His blessing where no one expected it. Everything is thrown into turmoil, all the religious fussers fuss, and the kingdom of God advances in glory.

## SO HEAR THE LORD CHRIST:

The point in verse 14 is often missed because of a translation issue. When it says “and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard,” it creates the impression that faith is created when people hear preachers talking about Jesus. But while this is true, much more is involved in this. A better translation here would be “and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard,” with no of. Men, women and children do not come to faith because they hear about Christ, but rather because they hear and see Christ Himself. How does this happen? It happens in full accordance with the folly of God—preaching (I Cor. 1:18-21). God’s plan for the transformation of the world is this: sending, preaching, hearing, believing, calling. When we ordain evangelists, missionaries, and church planters, what are we doing? We are sending Christ. Those sent preach Christ. The people hear Christ, and believe in Christ. What do they then do? They call upon Christ, and they are saved.

So this is not a mantra, or a magical incantation. It is the gospel. Jesus Christ was born of a woman, born under the law. He lived a perfect and sinless life, and was broken on the cross for our sins. He was laid in a tomb, in full accordance with the Scriptures, and He rose from the dead on the third day. He then ascended in glory to the right hand of God the Father, and what can all the assembled unbelievers, and their parliaments, armies and laws, do about it? Absolutely nothing, that’s what. As the prophet Isaiah also says, speaking of the glory of the gospel’s work in this world (Is. 64:4; I Cor. 2:9) “For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him” (Is. 64:4).



*Published by:* Canon Press • P.O. Box 8729 • 205 E. 5th St. • Moscow, ID 83843  
www.canonpress.com • [orders@canonpress.com](mailto:orders@canonpress.com) • 800-488-2034 • Fax 208-882-1568