

Chapter 49

True 'Hearing'

(Romans 10:14–18)

Why did the Jews not receive the gospel? Is it possible that somehow the message did not reach them? Paul turns to the way in which people actually get to hear the gospel. God makes adequate arrangements for his word to be communicated. He puts the matter as a string of questions. ¹⁴*How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe on him whom they have not truly 'heard'? And how shall they hear without a preacher?* ¹⁵*And how shall they preach unless they are sent?* Paul's questions imply four negative statements. (i) Salvation is by calling on Jesus but people cannot call upon him in whom they have not believed. (ii) They cannot believe on him whom they have not truly heard in their hearts. (iii) They cannot hear without a preacher. (iv) No one can preach unless such a person is sent.

Where there is no faith, there is no salvation. Paul is making a generalization. There might be exceptions. John the Baptist was 'filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb' (Luke 1:15). And no doubt there are variations in God's judgement and some are treated more leniently than others. But none of this can provide much comfort. The plight of the lost is awful. People do not have to hear the gospel and reject it in order to be lost. They are 'without excuse' (1:20). Generally speaking: no faith, no salvation.

Where there is no true ‘hearing’, there is no faith. The translation should not speak of ‘one of whom they have not heard’. Paul is not speaking of a message ‘about’ Jesus. Rather it should be ‘one whom they have not heard’ or ‘him whom they have not heard’. The Jews’ problem was not a matter of whether they had heard ‘about’ Jesus. Their problem was that in the preaching of the early Christians they did not hear Christ speaking to them himself. Believing is confident trust, when Jesus himself speaks to us in the preaching of God’s messengers. Believing involves a double hearing. We hear not only the preacher; we hear Christ.

The word for ‘hearing’ has a range of meanings; there is a play on words in Romans 10:14–16. ‘Hearing’ and ‘obeying’ were closely connected ideas. The word for ‘obey’ (*hupakouo*) is a compound form coming from the word to ‘hear’ (*akouo*). Responsiveness is an intensified kind of hearing. Throughout 10:14–16 Paul says that Israel did not ‘hear’ Jesus. But then in verse 18 he asks, ‘Did they not hear?’ and answers, ‘Indeed, they have heard!’ Obviously Paul is using the word ‘hear’ with a double meaning, just as Jesus used to. Israel did not hear – but Israel did hear! Perhaps one should use quotation marks to express this. There is hearing and ‘hearing’. Possibly one should speak of hearing and true hearing. I think the best thing I can do is use both quotation marks (‘ . . . ’) and the word ‘true’. There is hearing, and there is true ‘hearing’! He that has ears to hear let him truly ‘hear’! We can translate Romans 10:14b: *And how shall they believe on him whom they have not truly ‘heard’?* Faith comes when our hearts are opened to truly ‘hear’ the voice of Jesus. When there is faith, Christ is ‘heard’ in the gospel when he is proclaimed by messengers sent by God.

Paul’s third question implies that it is preaching that generally is God’s appointed way of bringing about true ‘hearing’ in the hearts of men and women. ‘Preaching’ means proclaiming good news. The ‘preacher’ announces that God’s epoch of salvation

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has arrived! It is not merely giving a talk or lecturing about theology. It is charismatic proclamation that salvation has been achieved through Jesus and is now available for anyone who will believe. Paul is not laying down rigid rules about how people are reached with the gospel of Jesus. He is speaking in generalizations, and he is dealing with one particular situation: how God provided for the people of Israel to hear the good news about Jesus.

One cannot preach unless one is sent by God. One cannot 'hear' Jesus unless someone proclaims the truth of Jesus. One does not believe unless one truly 'hears' the voice of Jesus. One cannot call upon Jesus unless one trusts him.

But did Israel hear the good news? Paul's answer is 'No and yes!' No, they did not hear in their hearts. There was no true inner realization that God was speaking to them in the preachers of the gospel. Did they hear? No!

Did they hear? Yes! In another sense, they did hear. They heard with their ears; they did not hear with their hearts. Paul says: ¹⁶*However, they did not all heed the glad tidings: for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our report?'* Paul is still toying with the idea of hearing.

The people of Israel heard the gospel about Jesus with their ears but they did not truly 'hear'. Nothing took place in their hearts. Paul says, 'However, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?"' The failure of Israel did not come from God. He sent messengers. Israel heard the message about Jesus with their ears – but Israel never truly 'heard' in the heart. Paul makes a deduction from everything he has said: ¹⁷*So faith comes from true 'hearing' and 'hearing' by the word of Christ.* This phrase is often quoted glibly. 'Faith comes by hearing', it is said, often quite thoughtlessly. But does it? Many hear the gospel but faith does not come to them! Many who have heard about Jesus and his salvation do not come to any special faith.

In the context of what Paul has been saying it can be seen that Paul is not making a glib remark about the value of noise going into one's ears! Rather he is using the word 'hearing' with a special emphasis and significance. I translate it: Faith comes from true 'hearing'. But when does true 'hearing' take place? 'Hearing' comes by the Word of Christ. True hearing occurs when Jesus is so with the preacher that the preacher's words become Christ's words. 'Hearing' in the heart comes by 'the word of Christ'. It comes when Jesus speaks with authority and power.

In one sense Israel failed to 'hear' the good news about Jesus. But in another sense they heard all about it. They had ample and abundant opportunity to know all about Jesus and what he did for the salvation of men and women.

Paul says:

¹⁸But I say: they have never heard, have they? Indeed, they have heard,

*'For their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.'*

Is it possible, asks Paul, that Israel did not actually get to hear the message? His answer is: certainly they heard it with their ears! But they refused to respond to it. Israel fell out of God's purpose because of unbelief. Unbelief is always disastrous.