

Chapter 50

Could Israel Plead Ignorance?

(Romans 10:19–21)

1. **The gospel came to the world amidst great publicity.** Originally the words of Psalm 19:4 referred not to preaching but to the voice of God in creation. ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the sky proclaims his handiwork . . .’ (Psalm 19:1). Paul’s use of Psalm 19 in effect says: ‘Just as in the voice of **nature** God wants every creature to be conscious of his handiwork in **creating** the world, so with the message of **the preacher** God wants every creature to be conscious of his handiwork in **saving** the world.’ Beginning with the Jews God wanted his announcement of salvation to be heard, in the same way that his glory is seen wherever the sun shines, wherever the sky is overhead, everywhere! Psalm 19 itself makes this point since it begins with the voice of God in creation (verses 1–6) but goes on to deal with the voice of God in the Scriptures (verses 7–10).

God sent out the message everywhere, beginning with Israel. First God sent John the Baptist to speak of the coming Saviour. Then, during Jesus’ lifetime, he sent out his apostles, specially to Israel. Jesus himself addressed the Jewish parliament and spoke of his being the Son of God. No Jewish leader in the national parliament could claim that Jesus had not himself spoken to them. Then on the Day of Pentecost there were ‘Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven’ (Acts 2:5). When the lame man in Jerusalem was healed, once again the Jewish

leaders knew all about it. Peter said: ‘Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene . . . this man stands before you in good health’ (Acts 4:10)! Later Stephen also addressed the Jewish parliament. No one could possibly say that the gospel message was not heard!

2. **The Scriptures gave ample warning of Israel’s danger.** The gospel came to the world in fulfilment of the Old Testament. Israel ought to have known that there would come a message which was available for everyone, Jews and gentiles alike.

¹⁹*But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says,*

*‘I will stir you up to envy with that which is not a nation.
By means of a senseless nation I “will provoke you to
anger.”’*

Israel’s own Scriptures had warned that if Israel responded to God with unbelief, God would turn elsewhere. Deuteronomy 32:21 said as much. Israel should not have been surprised that God turned to the gentiles and brought a salvation which was so ‘without works’ that even a foolish nation – the gentiles – could experience salvation.

Paul has quoted the law. Next he quotes the prophets.

²⁰*And then Isaiah makes bold to say,*

*‘I was found by those who did not seek me;
I appeared to those who did not enquire for me.’*

Isaiah 65:1 refers to ‘a nation not called by my name’ (as the Hebrew of Isaiah 65:1 is to be translated); it clearly refers to gentiles. The gentiles were not seeking any salvation at all, certainly not through a Saviour born in Israel. Gentiles who

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were not pursuing righteousness laid hold of the righteousness which is by faith, but Israel failed because generally speaking they were preoccupied with their much-loved law given through Moses. The gentiles were not looking for salvation but they came to faith in Christ in large numbers. God decided to reach the unreachable. If Israel had taken notice of their greatest law-giver, Moses, and their greatest prophetic writer, Isaiah, they would have been prepared for the inclusion of gentiles in God's salvation. Isaiah 65 went on to speak of Israel.

²¹*But of Israel he says,*

'I stretched out my hands all day long to an unbelieving and contradicting people.' (See Isaiah 65:2.)

This is Paul's strongest statement about Israel so far. He has approached the subject sympathetically, but his criticism of their unbelief has risen in forcefulness throughout Romans 10. They were, he says, ignorant, unsubmitive (10:3), unbelieving (10:16), wilfully shutting their ears to the Christian preachers (10:18), blind to the teaching of their own Scriptures (10:19–20). Now comes his strongest statement: they were 'unbelieving and obstinate' (10:21).

3. **God's purpose has not failed.** Paul has confirmed what he said back in Romans 9:6a. He said there, 'It is not as though the word of God has fallen aside.' He has now shown that the fault is entirely with Israel. The unbelief and unfaithfulness was on their side, not God's side. God loves to reach the unreachable and so when Israel disbelieved he went after gentiles. 'I appeared to those who did not enquire for me.' Salvation comes only through God's grace. If those who were saved were not either seeking God's grace or in any way enquiring after God – then it must be pure intervention on God's part that led any gentile to come to salvation. If the traditional members of God's people

will not respond to him, God will turn elsewhere and find some untraditional people to bring into his church.

God had shown much love to the people of Israel. He says to Israel: 'I stretched out my hands all day long . . . ' The idea of 'stretching out the hands' is normally a reference to prayer, but what we have here is not some people spreading out their hands in plea to God, but God stretching out his hands pleading with the nation of Israel!

4. The failure of Israel left God free to turn elsewhere in his programme of salvation. Since Israel rejected God's loving offer in Jesus, he was free to call to salvation anyone he wished. The people of Israel were those for whom originally a great banquet of salvation was being prepared. Then Jesus came 'to the Jew first' (1:16). But those who were offered salvation first rejected it when the long-awaited day actually came. This left God free. No one could complain if he sent his messengers into the highways and byways to reach unworthy gentiles.

5. In Israel's fall the depth of human ingratitude is seen. What Israel did is what we all could have done and would have done if we had been in their situation. There is no way we can be self-righteous when we look at Israel. They fell badly in rejecting Jesus, but that is simply a revelation of what men and women are like everywhere. Not only did they refuse to believe; they were argumentative. They liked to speak with hostility against God's gospel. Most people are the same. Not only do men and women refuse to believe, they want to start argumentatively and contentiously fighting against him. Somehow sinners resent even God's generosity.

There is something wonderful in this part of Romans which may be easily missed. Read 10:21 and 11:1 one after the other, ignoring the chapter division. Paul says that God ²¹*stretched out his hands all day long to an unbelieving and contradicting people.* ¹*I ask then, has God repudiated his people? Not at all! Paul has not finished!*