THE STUMBLING STONE

Romans 9:1-33
Key Verse: 9:33

“As it is written, ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’”

In this passage, Paul reveals his own personal struggle to understand God’s will and purpose for his people, the Jews. Paul was a Jew’s Jew, a man of great pride in his heritage as one of God’s chosen people. But Paul was chosen by God to be a light to the Gentiles. As a result, the Jews became his mortal enemies. This caused Paul great grief and anguish. But Paul did not blame God for his situation or the situation of his people. Instead, when Paul meditated on God’s word he found that God in his sovereign will was ruling over human history with patience and great mercy. But his people had stumbled because they tried to substitute their own desire and effort in place of God’s calling. Paul shares his struggle with us because of his prayer for his people. He also shares this struggle as a warning to those who might forget that it is God who chooses, and not man. May God bless us to open our eyes and see the stone that causes proud men to stumble, but which lifts up the humble to heavenly glory and grace.

I. The divine privilege of God’s calling

In chapters 1-8, Paul explained the gospel and it’s meaning so well. We are sinners who were God’s enemies because of sin, but who became instruments of God’s righteousness because of God’s grace to us through Jesus Christ. Through Christ Jesus, we have become children of God, heirs of God’s kingdom and more than conquerors in life. Hallelujah! Amen! This is good news of great joy for all the people.

Yet Paul is not happy. Look at verses 1-4a. “I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my
brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” Why is Paul so sad? It is because, what we, the followers of Christ, have received by faith, Israel also had as the chosen people of God. Look at verses 4b-5. “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” What we Gentiles have received by faith, the Jews also received from God, first. But what they had received so freely from God, they now had lost. The privilege of being a child of God, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation had passed on from them to the Gentiles. It should never have come to this. But it had, to Paul’s great regret. It happened because what had been given to the Israelites as a privilege came to be seen by them as their divine right as the chosen people. In short, their self-righteousness made them forget God’s divine right to choose, as well as God’s divine purpose in choosing.

We must consider what a great privilege it is to be chosen by God and to receive God’s calling. Paul lists eight such privileges. The first is "the adoption as sons." (Ex 4:22) In the past, to be adopted as a son in an aristocratic Roman family was a great blessing to the people of Roman satellite countries. How much more a blessing for Israel to be adopted as sons of God Almighty! The second was "the divine glory." Here "glory" means God's revelation to his people. It also means that God was in their midst. God scarcely reveals himself to mundane men. In the Bible, God revealed himself to a limited number of people. For example, God revealed himself to Moses in glory on Mt. Sinai. God revealed himself to the Son of Man on the top of the Transfiguration Mount in shining glory. It was indeed a great blessing for Israel that they had the privilege of seeing the glory of God. Those who see only evil people become like those evil people and live in this world with the fear of living among evil people. On the other hand, those who see the glory of God can have the glory of God in their hearts and live in this world gloriously and victoriously, not fearfully. So it is necessary for us to see the glory of God. We can see the glory of God, sometimes through Bible study and prayer, and sometimes through obedience to the will of God.
The third is "the covenants" of God. The covenant is God's specific promises to his own people. God made Abraham his covenant people. This covenant had been undergirding Jewish confidence that they were a covenant people of God. Their confidence in being a covenant people made them mighty strong until they knew no defeat. They were always victorious in any situation. (Ge.12,15,17) The fourth is the receiving of the "law." The law refers to the Ten Commandments. Spiritually speaking, it is the foundation of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of life. The fifth is "the temple worship," the same as worship service. It is indeed a great blessing that the children of God come to the church of God and listen to the voice of God through the Bible and repent their sins and renew their spirits. Worship does not mean to carry out a certain series of liturgy or rites in routine. It means to praise God, thank God and honor God as God. The sixth is "the promises," which are basically the same as the covenants. However, the promises focus on the Messiah, while the covenant emphasizes the relationship between God and his people.

The seventh is the patriarchs. They are all the greatest fathers of faith who ever lived. They were all men and women of God who had lived for the glory of God and for the blessing of God's holy children. For a nation, even to have one man whose spiritual quality can be equal to that of one of the patriarchs is truly great. But there has been none. So people of the world borrow their names, beginning with Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin. But the people of Israel have so many great men of God to look up to. They are indeed blessed people. The representatives of the patriarchs are Abraham, David and Jesus Christ.

The eighth is "the human ancestry of Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ is God over all, forever praised. At that time the Jews did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God. They only recognized him as the son of a Nazarene carpenter. But Paul makes a forthright declaration that Jesus is God over all, forever praised. Of course, when he said this, Paul had his own people on his mind. He had a heart's desire to gain his people over to Jesus. Of course, Paul knew how his people rejected and crucified Jesus Christ. So it was dangerous to declare the divinity of Jesus. But Paul does not compromise; he does not remove Christ as God and from the place of Messiahship, nor does he
deny the uniqueness of Christ. Paul's endeavor to win his people's allegiance to Christ was truly great. Still his message was Jesus is Christ, who is God over all. "Christ is God over all" means Christ is God for all mankind over all circumstances, events, nations and ages. "Christ is God over all" should be all Christians' motto. Also, "Christ is God over all" is indeed the key point of the message in the proclamation of the gospel to the entire world. This message has a direct bearing upon the church of Jesus Christ, which it should bear as the mission from God.

Here we learn that God's blessings are "holy privileges." All privilege requires tremendous responsibility. For example, according to Bible teaching, marriage is the focal point of God's blessings on the basis of God's command, "Be fruitful." (Gn 1:28) But to a man, the blessing of marriage requires a tremendous responsibility of supporting his wife and children without fail. It is required of a woman who has the blessing of marriage, to mother her husband and her children. It is tragic that God's chosen people enjoyed God's blessings to the full extent. But they never carried out their responsibility as a priestly nation. God, in his sovereign will, took these privileges and gave them to others.

II. God's absolute calling

Of course, in our self-righteousness we can agree that the Jews had failed to live up to God's calling, and so deserved to forfeit their inheritance in God to us. But this is shortsighted and foolish. If God changed his mind in dealing with the Israelites, negating his promises, then we cannot claim God's word as absolute, nor God's promises as sure. But God did not change his mind. Look at verses 6 and 7. “It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'” It is not from us that God began to exercise his sovereign choice. No, God has exercised his will in choosing whom he wants to choose from the beginning of the establishment of his world salvation plan. God’s divine privileges and divine calling have always belonged to the ones God called. Isaac was
chosen as the descendant of Abraham. Jacob was chosen as the
descendant of Isaac. In this way, God clearly demonstrated through
history that it has never been because of human qualifications that we
can be chosen. Rather, God's purpose in election stands. It is not by
works but by him who calls. Look at verses 10-13. “Not only that, but
Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet,
before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order
that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him
who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it
is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

God’s absolute right to choose whom he chooses does not sit well
with those who insist on human rights. But God’s right to choose is his
fundamental right as our Creator. His choosing follows an absolute
principle; it is not at all a malicious or capricious exercise of will. Look
at verses 14-16. “What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For
he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will
have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ It does not, therefore,
depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” God has a good
and perfect plan to save all mankind from sin, and bring us back into
his heavenly kingdom. God's desire is to save. God is not pleased to
judge or destroy. Nevertheless, God’s merciful plan of world salvation
does not mean that God himself is subject to the judgment or
evaluation of his creation, man. His mercy and love are self-motivated.
We cannot demand them, any more than a piece of pottery can
demand to be shaped for a noble rather than common purpose. We
must simply acknowledge God’s mercy as revealed through the
choices he has made in dealing with his creation, man. Those who
complain, “Why did you make me like this?” must acknowledge God's
merciful and sovereign will in their lives. We must believe that by
creating us, he has called us to participate in his world salvation
purpose. We must know that God “works for the good of those who
love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Ro 8:28)

Look at verses 22-24. “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and
make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his
wrath – prepared for destruction? And what if God did this to make the
riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, prepared in
advance for glory – even us, whom he has also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.” In these verses, Paul identifies that there are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who are objects of God’s wrath and there are those who are objects of his mercy. And yet, in fact, God is merciful to them all. For what is God’s patience in bearing with the wicked, if not mercy? As Paul said of himself in 1 Timothy 1:16, “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” God’s mercy to the objects of his wrath is patience, so that they might repent and believe. God’s mercy to the objects of his mercy is that he called them into his service and to bear the divine privileges and responsibilities as his children. This is the mysterious love of God who has hope for us all.

On the night of Jesus’ arrest, his disciples were gathered with him for the last supper. The disciples were in turmoil because of the growing hostility of the Jews as well as Jesus’ own prediction that one of them would betray him. But Jesus knew the sovereign will of God. Therefore, Jesus took off his outer garments and, having wrapped a towel around his waist, began to wash his disciples’ feet in a basin and drying them with the towel. Then Jesus took the bread prepared for the meal and broke it, sharing it with everyone there, even Judas Iscariot. The devil had already prompted Judas to betray Jesus. Jesus revealed to Judas that he knew what he was about to do. But Jesus said to Judas, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” Judas stepped out into the night to go and tell the Jewish religious leaders where Jesus would be. Jesus patiently served Judas to the end. But Judas remained as an object of wrath. Jesus was sorry for Judas. But he was not sorry for himself. He said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.” (Jn 13:31)

Simon Peter was not happy to hear that Jesus was going to be taken away from them soon. Earlier, he had rebuked Jesus for speaking about his death, and had been called Satan for doing so. Still, he could not give up his human idea to fight against God’s will for Jesus to die on the cross for the sin of the world. Jesus gently told him that he could not resist God’s will and purpose. Jesus was arrested that night.
Simon Peter tried to follow him and fight for his release. But he was helpless to do anything, and denied Jesus three times to save his own skin. Simon Peter cried at his own wretchedness. Later, however, Peter acknowledged that what Christ had done, he had done for us. 1 Peter 2:24 says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you are healed.” Peter took his calling from Christ to live for righteousness very seriously. 1 Peter 4:13 says, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” From this we can understand that the objects of God's wrath are those who reject God’s sovereign purpose to participate in God’s world salvation plan. The objects of his mercy also rejected God's purpose, until they humbly acknowledged God's patience and tender mercy in choosing them as his instruments of righteousness. Praise God who called us in mercy to participate in his world salvation plan.

It was God’s merciful grace that now made the Gentiles his children, his people, his loved ones. It was also God's merciful grace that the Israelites were not totally destroyed because of their rebellion and pride. We must see God's merciful grace to us, and bow our heads in submission to his sovereign will and purpose for us.

III. The stumbling stone

Of course, God's world salvation plan is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this way of salvation does not take into account any human effort or labor, nor does it credit any human sympathy for those who suffered more than others. It is a salvation that is wholly dependent on God’s sovereign choice to have mercy on whom he has mercy. It is a salvation that is by faith in the merciful God who is the Creator of heaven and earth. For the Gentiles, who had despaired of pursuing righteousness, it was amazing grace that gave them a righteousness that is by faith. For the Jews, however, it was an affront to their pride. It seemed to make their struggle to live up to God’s high calling for 2,000 years a joke. God in his great mercy gave up his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. But the Jews were very
sorry that God gave them no credit for their suffering as the chosen people. Thus, Christ Jesus became for them a stumbling stone. Look at verse 33. “See, I lay a stone in Zion that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. But sinners who will not acknowledge God’s sovereign authority over their lives reject God’s calling to participate in his world salvation plan. They also reject God’s salvation for them and remain as objects of wrath. But the one who acknowledges that Christ came to save sinners, of whom I am the worst, can experience the faithfulness and mercy of our God. We will never be put to shame, but can live from now on as righteous servants of God.

May God help us not to remain as objects of wrath. May God help us to repent of our pride and humbly submit to his sovereign purpose and calling for us to participate in his world salvation purpose.