

All Roads Lead Here: Hot Pursuit?
By Jason Huff
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Hosea 1:2-10; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Romans 9:22-33

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 9:22-33. May the Lord guide our hearts and minds today through the reading of His holy Word. “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? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory -- even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah." What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." 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."”

Do we have the right to change a story’s plot? In the modern world, it happens a lot. Movie studios have what’re known as test screenings. They play an unfinished movie for an audience and see what they think. Sometimes filmmakers spend millions of dollars changing things audiences didn’t like. Test audiences have changed how love triangles are resolved, if characters live or die, if a movie ends tragically or not. It’s not about whether or not a story is *good*; it’s whether or not it will make money.

But there are parts of the story you just can’t mess with. You can set *Romeo and Juliet* in the modern day on the upper west side of New York City, but if they live happily ever after, you don’t have *Romeo and Juliet*. You can’t have *A Christmas Carol* without Scrooge’s change of heart; you can’t tell the story of the Titanic without the boat sinking.

Some stories we can’t rewrite, and that’s especially true of God’s story. Not only can we not rewrite history, we can’t change God’s fundamental nature and the way He deals with us. Once we understand Him, we wouldn’t want to. As we’ve found together in chapter 9 of Romans, God is the one ultimately in charge of salvation. Paul sums up his whole argument in verse 16: “It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.”

Paul has discussed God’s sovereign control from different angles – first giving the proof of God’s control over history, then answering objections to it. In this week’s passage, Paul shows how God’s choices benefit not just Israel but the entire world. Paul also illustrates that God’s love for His people comes from His own choice to save us despite our sins.

We start where we left off – God prepares some of us in advance for glory, to come to Him in faith, to know His love, to become His children. And God calls us from all nations. For nearly 2000 years, God’s blessings were specifically on the Jewish people and those who blessed them. But God has chosen to love people from all over the world, from every race and tribe, people who were not part of the original promise to Abraham. That’s what Paul is getting at when he quotes from Hosea.

Hosea is one of the saddest stories in all of Scripture. Hosea was a prophet, and God’s prophets did a lot of crazy things meant to get the attention of Israel. Now the prophetic books are very foreign to us. They talk about faraway places and distant conflicts we don’t know anything about. Often, they seem weird. But you know what? The people of Israel had a hard time listening to the prophets too...not because the prophecies were foreign to *them*, but because they didn’t like hearing that God was upset with them. So they ignored the prophet’s *words*.

So God had the prophets do crazy things people couldn’t ignore. For over a year, Ezekiel lay on his side out in public to illustrate God’s punishment of the sins of Israel. Isaiah preached naked for three years to show that when Israel counted on Egypt for protection rather than God, they were really naked to their enemies. You could let the prophet’s words go in one ear and out the other, but you couldn’t ignore them when they were making their point in the town square.

God has Hosea do something similar. Israel was consistently unfaithful to God, and God wants to make a point of it. So he tells Hosea to take a wife for himself – a “woman of the night,” a harlot, someone who will be unfaithful to him like Israel is towards God. Her name is Gomer. And when Hosea and Gomer have children together, God has Hosea name them in bizarre ways. One is named “No Mercy” because God will not show His mercy to Israel any more. Another is named “Not My People” because God has disowned the unfaithful Hebrews. God shows His frustration with Israel through Hosea.

The people couldn’t ignore Hosea and Gomer and their children because they all knew about it. Their children played with No Mercy and Not My People. They saw Gomer talking to every handsome and wealthy man who came into town. They saw Hosea track down Gomer when she sold herself to a lover, and he ransoms her back – not because she deserves it, but because she is his wife. It was a real-life illustration of how God takes us back when we sin, even though we don’t deserve it, because He loves us and has chosen us to be His own.

And that’s the beautiful part of the story. God tells Hosea, things won’t always be like this. There will be a day when the people represented by No Mercy and Not My People will be mine. I will call them My People, I will call them You Have Received Mercy. There are people outside my presence, outside my love, God says, that I am going to call my own simply because I love them. I will heal them and love them and make them righteous.

God claims both Jews and Gentiles, people from every nation, but not everybody who is an Israelite is saved. Paul has already talked about it, but he drives the point home with his quote from Isaiah – there are a ton of physical descendants of Abraham, but only the remnant, those who love God and follow Him and want to be with Him, will be saved. And the remnant didn’t exist because they were good people but because God chose them to be His.

Isaiah wrote, “Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.” Now Sodom and Gomorrah were the first big cities God ever destroyed because they were so incredibly depraved. When you said Sodom and Gomorrah to an ancient Israelite, they instantly knew you were talking about people who were wicked beyond compare.

Who does Isaiah say created faithful descendants for Abraham? God. God left us faithful descendants. God’s divine plan, His story, His providence, was that there would always be a faithful contingent of people within Israel who would trust Him for salvation. God chose some people from Israel and created them, formed them, and molded them that they would come to rely on Him and not on themselves. But that’s God’s doing. Had God not intervened, Isaiah says, every last Israelite would have been just as bad as the evil people in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Paul then moves on to the biggest shocker that proves God’s will and ways are supreme and not our own. He writes, “the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.”

To anybody paying attention to the Old Testament era of faith (or remembering back to Romans 1), this is amazing and stunning. How could the Gentiles obtain righteousness, and why? Romans 1 details just how perverse and awful the Gentiles were, how they constantly ignored the signs that God was there in nature and in their moral reasoning, how they found new ways of sinning. These people who didn’t have the covenant of God, the word of God, the prophets of God, the temple of God, how did they get ahold of godliness and righteousness and not the Jews? How are they in and the Jews out?

As Romans 9 has taught us, God’s sovereign will is key. He chose to open His Kingdom to the Gentiles at the same time the Jews rejected the Savior He sent for them. The Gentiles obtained a righteousness by faith – they believe in Jesus and trust in Him for salvation. Despite all their sinfulness, God made a way for them too.

Because not only Israel was represented by Hosea’s children, by No Mercy and Not My People; they also represented the Gentiles. They didn’t have a prayer of receiving God’s grace. They were foreigners to God’s covenant and God’s ways and God’s mercy. God made no promises to the Gentiles to show them mercy, yet He decided to show it to them anyway. And for all of us here who don’t have Jewish ancestry, that’s us. That’s how we’re in too.

But going back to the question – how did the Jewish people not attain righteousness? The super-religious Jews of Jesus and Paul’s day, the Pharisees, were experts at keeping the law of Moses. They kept every commandment as they understood it, and their religious scholars debated the smallest points of the law to make sure they didn’t break it. The religious people prayed often and gave lots of money to the temple. They put us to shame in terms of following what God said to do. If anyone could be righteous by the Law given to Moses, it was them.

So how did they miss out on righteousness? As Paul says, “they pursued righteousness not by faith but as if it were by works.” They thought their works made them right with God. And they stumbled over the cornerstone of Jesus. Jesus taught that no one was righteous before God, that they needed faith and not works, that only by belief and trust could anyone see the Kingdom of God. Despite all their rule-keeping, they still broke the spirit of the law, Jesus said. They sinned grievously because their hearts were hard towards God. When Jesus taught that hatred was equal to murder and lust equal to adultery, their sins were exposed. And they had Jesus crucified over it.

The Gentiles weren’t looking for God, but God found them. God gave them faith in Himself and brought the Gentiles into the family through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders thought they were pursuing God, but when Jesus pointed out they were on the wrong path, they killed the messenger rather than switching directions.

So what does all this mean for us? This is where God’s choices and our human wills come together. This is where what and who we rely on makes an eternal difference in our personal stories. As we said at the beginning, we cannot change God’s story and how He does things to suit our purposes, so we have to get two things right. And so the first thing we must get right is this: *we must not rely on our goodness or our “seeking God” to get into heaven.*

I might sound like a broken record on this. “Pastor Jason’s saying we’re not good enough to get into heaven again.” Yet it was a core teaching of Jesus, and it is the most disregarded teaching in American Christianity. In a 2016 survey by Lifeway Research and Ligonier Ministries, they found that 52% of Americans believe they earn their way into heaven, at least to some extent. 69% believe that God only responds to us once we have moved towards Him, that our salvation is reliant on our first steps instead of the Holy Spirit making us receptive to God. 76% believe that we personally contribute to our own salvation; only 16% disagreed. This means that a huge portion of Americans believe their own goodness, as seen in their pursuit of God and their good deeds, should merit them God’s salvation, that it’s owed to them. God may have done the heavy lifting, but we have to contribute our share, and once we do that, God is in our debt.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it’s totally against what Scripture teaches. It is not by our effort or will that we are saved but by God’s mercy. It always grieves me when I hear someone say, “I hope I’m good enough to get into heaven.” Because guess what? You’re not, and I’m not. There are not many things I am absolutely certain about, but I am certain about this: anyone who believes or hopes that they are good enough to get into heaven isn’t a Christian and is in fact not going to make it in unless their minds change.

Sounds judgmental, right? But it’s not. Why not? Because it’s just a fact. How many of you have gotten a Whopper at McDonalds? Hands? You’ve never gotten a Whopper at McDonalds. Because McDonalds doesn’t serve Whoppers, only Burger King. It’s not a judgment call of whether or not McDonalds or Burger King or Whoppers are any good. It’s a simple fact that you can’t get a Whopper at McDonalds! You can’t change the story to make your desires fit. You can go to every McDonalds around the world and not one of them will sell you a Whopper. It just doesn’t work like that.

Many Americans are on the same path as the Pharisees when it comes to their righteousness before God. They think they are in hot pursuit of God. They believe they can earn salvation by their merits. They think by being good people, they will have a place in heaven. But you know what stone lies in the way that you'll fall over? Jesus. Even if you believe in Jesus, if you believe that you have to add something to Jesus, you wind up with nothing. Paul wrote to the Galatians very strongly that if they added anything to salvation, like requiring new Christians to follow the Jewish ritual laws, they would have nothing in the Kingdom.

Do we do good things when we're Christians? Do we become more righteous and pursue more righteousness? Absolutely! But only because we are saved, not to be saved. We become better people as a result of God's mercy, not to earn God's mercy. It may seem like a tiny difference, but it is infinitely important.

And that leads to the second (and last) key point we must get right: *We must rely only on Jesus, because the righteousness that comes from faith in Jesus is the only way into God's Kingdom.* This is God's story, the story that's better than what we thought it would be, the story we don't want to change. God's Kingdom includes people from all over the world who turn to Jesus in faith and trust. And it isn't that we pursue God, but that God pursued us, changed us, filled us with faith, and brought us into His Kingdom.

We who trust in Jesus will never be put to shame. We who truly trust in the Son for salvation and follow Him will not get to heaven and be thrown out. Because that trust is something that God did in us, and God doesn't do that to throw that work away. Everyone who truly believes and sticks with their belief, God has done that for them, in them. And when this life is done, that confidence will be proven true. We aren't saved by anything we've done, but because of God's grace, Jesus will have prepared a place for all of us who have thrown ourselves at His feet asking for His mercy, all who have followed Him and not the way of the world, and we will be ushered into the Kingdom of God to enjoy Him forever.

The story of Hosea is our story. We were once No Mercy and Not My People, but God has turned His eye upon us and loved us. We once were Gomer, trying to find pleasure in all the wrong places, trying to find joy in everything else but the One who loves us. But now God has come after us. Just like Hosea ransomed Gomer from her lover, God has ransomed us at the cost of His own Son. He has taken us home and shown us kindness and now desires for us to become more like Him.

My plea for us today is this: if we think we're in hot pursuit of God because we're good people, let's stop. We aren't good people. In fact, unless God has turned us around, we're on the opposite road to God's Kingdom. We're not going to reach it unless we turn around, and the only way we turn around is to admit that we were wrong in thinking we could make God save us. Because when we think we're pursuing God by doing good things instead of coming to the feet of Jesus, we're actually playing the harlot. We're running off to the false god of self-fulfillment.

But turn to Jesus. Give your life over to Him and trust in Him. Don't lean on your own understanding, but in everything give yourself to Jesus. He will give you a hope and a future. He will direct you on the right path. And He will save your soul.