

THE UPSIDE-DOWN, BACKWARDS IRONY OF FAITH, ROMANS 9:30-10:21

Pax Romana 24

Intro: It's a weird word, but most people seem to know what it means: Topsy-Turvy. Know what that means? Kinda like the "top side gets turned" to the bottom, its tipped, or mixed up. Right? It's vice-versa, about-faced. It's juxtaposed, the other way around. Mutatis-mutandis (and no, that's not a Harry Potter spell or a Pumba saying). You get the picture. I remember in grade school there was a fad for a while of finding clever ways to belittle each other, because, well, people are basically...good. So one kid said, "You're so small you have to plan handball against the curb." And other retorted, "If brains were dynamite you wouldn't have enough to blow your nose." And another supposed that "If your brain was on a razor's edge, it'd be like a BB on an 8 lane highway." But the one that intrigued me the most back in fourth grade was the clever kid who said, "You're so small you have to look up to look down." I could never quite figure that one. I can only assume I had one of those very small brains. Looking up to look down would be "topsy-turvy" for sure.

1. The text we are meditating on today is about the **topsy-turvy life of the Hebrew Nation, and of religion in general, all of which accents our deep need for a gracious, self-giving savior, and our hopelessness without him.** And of course by him, I mean Jesus, God's Son who was himself kind of "topsy-turvied" in that he is Creator, Sovereign, the one True God, but became human, like a mere created being, while retaining divini-

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ty, left heaven (up) to come to earth (down) so sinners (down) could go to heaven (up).

"Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Philippians 2:6-11, NLT.

You may have noticed that our text is book-ended by the observation that religious, and chosen Israel misses God, while irreligious and pagan nations find God, or we should say, are found by God. It's ironic. Take a look.

"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." Romans 9:30, 31, NIV.

Then later Paul makes the same assertion quoting Israel's own prophet, Isaiah.

"And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."" Romans 10:20, 21, NIV.

Pagans got saved. God's people missed it. So there's something that Paul sees in Israel's history that is important enough to dwell

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on. He's been saying that God's love will never leave us, it doesn't fail, you can be sure every detail of your life he will weave into a tapestry which we cannot imagine or see this side of heaven.

This is the confidence of chapter 8. Go back and read it. But then in 9-11 he's observing that it sure looks like God's electing love for Israel as a nation wasn't a forever love. And in case you think that God changes tactics, or changes interest, or gives up on people –and therefore just might get a little sick and tired of YOU (because you have times are like Israel when you walk away, and are "stiff-necked" and ignore God, and disobey, and maybe wonder to yourself "how am I going to balance the scales, keep God on my side, or make things up to God, or fix my topsy-turvy living? What if God gets sick of me like Israel his chosen!!!?) ...

Well, Paul wants to tell you what's really going on.

2. God loves me because of himself, so I don't need to get anxious when I blow it. God doesn't change.

"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." Malachi 3:6, NIV.

A. How can we be sure of God's love? How do we know God doesn't change things up? Because God didn't change tactics. In other words, God is never topsy-turvy like that! A lot of bible readers adopt the notion that God worked in different ways in the various ages or dispensations of human history. In each era God tried a different tactic, like a different obstacle course to be followed and obeyed. When people failed or rebelled to that way,

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God restarted with a new era and a different way. Accordingly, there once was a time when God made the way to heaven, and earthly blessing as well, through laws -the period from Moses to Jesus. But Israel failed so God started a new covenant with Jesus by faith. Well, Paul in his letter to the Romans and other letters comes down hard on this idea and basically asserts that God doesn't change: there always was only one covenant way to salvation: faith in the forgiving love of God that would somehow pay off our sins and demerits and freely give us the salvation we humans are unable to earn. In other words, the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

v3 Israel did not know the "righteousness that comes from God" and not from yourself. This is his central theme in Romans, and it keeps coming back Remember Chapter 1?

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."" Romans 1:17, NIV.

Paul tells us Israel should have seen this all along. Paul spent all of chapter 4 proving that **Abraham** knew that righteousness was by faith, not performance. In our passage today, Paul goes back into Moses' writings to prove that the same thing was there too. **Moses** knew salvation would come by faith. In a minute we'll see that later prophets also knew this. But first Moses.

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v5 quotes Moses' Book of Leviticus which basically says "If you can keep all these right ways in the law, you will indeed reach salvation." But truth be known, you can't.

v6 quotes Moses' Book of Deuteronomy(Dt) chapter 30. Now stay with me a minute. A little background. In Dt.28-29 Moses says to Israel in essence "If you obey you will have blessing. If you rebel against God you will have cursing. And I predict you will rebel and you will go into exile as slaves under another nation." (By the way, in Paul's day many Jewish folk believed they were in the enslavement era Moses predicted in Dt.29.) Then comes Dt.30 which Paul quotes here in Romans 10:6. In Dt.30 Moses in essence tells them, "But when that happens there is still hope. God knows it is beyond you to do the right thing. So he is going to put the right thing in your heart for you. You won't have to climb your way to heaven. You won't have to dig your way out of hell. Paul's point is that faith in Jesus is what Moses was already talking about in Deuteronomy. Jesus said the same thing.

"But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." John 5:45, 46, NIV.

There is still hope because God is not done even with ethnic Israel. God never forsakes his chosen people, not individuals, not nations. Paul explains as he quotes Moses that Jesus came down from heaven (incarnation), and Jesus came up from hell (resurrection). He is the word "in your mouth and in your heart" (v8

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Moses terms). Salvation from sin is a matter of your heart's confession (v9-10) and not keeping laws.

So Abraham knew. Moses knew. Paul adds a few **prophets, Isaiah, and Joel** who also knew.

v11 Anyone who trusts..." Not anyone who wins a lot of moral medals.

v13 "Everyone who calls..." Not everyone who goes on mission, always shares, never steals.

You can join Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Joel, Paul right now, today!

You can trust in Jesus to earn you heaven right now. You can call on the Lord every day and he will step right into your upside down whatever it is.

B. Israel should have known. Israel is the the supreme example of getting religion topsy-turvy. And they are a lesson to all the rest of us, because we all do the exact same thing. Every religion on earth says there are certain things you DO to get happiness, blessing, heaven, eternal life. Christianity is the only religion that say it's DONE for you by Jesus, so sit back, love him back, and don't get it backwards. It's so ironic, that we think otherwise, like Israel did.

But you say, I don't think otherwise. But you do, don't you?

When do you feel happy about yourself? Isn't after you have done something nice, or impressive. Or after you've made it through 7 days without doing something you know is wrong and you want to succeed in doing right? When do you hate yourself?

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Isn't when you have done something wrong, and especially when others know about it? When are you content with yourself? Isn't after you've been really zealous and conquered something, taught something, been right about something? A marathon. Surviving nursery duty. Having the answer to your kids math question.

Throwing yourself into influencing you ball team. Serving on the church council being zealous for church growth.

Hey, Israel was über zealous! (v2) And zealous "for God" too yet! But zeal isn't the life-giving ingredient. You can be zealous to quiet a toddler with a PBJ sandwich but if you don't know he's got a peanut allergy, it's not going to end well! So meaning well is not enough.

But have you ever just sat somewhere in quietness and listened to God tell you he loves you just because? It's true. God electing love starts in him! Not you. It's how you feel about your newborn. You *want* to love her or him. They've done nothing. They will surely do a lot of crappy things that you will clean up because of this phenomena called love. That sovereign decision to love is what God feels for his kids. That's what Paul is saying about the nation of Israel, and that's also what Paul is saying about believers who because of the gift of faith, now realize how much God loves them!

Wayne Cordeiro writes: When my daughter Amy was three years old, we had her in a preschool. They were going to give the parents of the preschoolers a Christmas concert, so we filled a tight-

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capacity room. Every parent was there, equipped with a camera and the biggest flash it could bear. About 30 kids came out and filled up the risers, all tucked together. One willing-hearted teacher up front led them in "Joy to the World." She had a nylon string guitar that probably hadn't been played since the Christmas program the year before, and that was probably the last time it was tuned as well. Nevertheless, she had a willing heart. The kids were only three years old. They could barely speak in complete sentences, let alone sing full measures of music. Undaunted, the teacher began her solo "Joy to the world!" but the kids were more interested in locating their parents: "Hi, Daddy! Hi, Mom!" The teacher kept singing, "Joy to the world!" Then Amy saw me. I took a picture of her. The teacher kept singing, "Joy to the world!" Just then one of the boys in the back of the risers began to fall backwards. He bravely took four others with him. Bang! She kept singing, "Joy to the world!"

It was absolute chaos: formless and void. When the song was done, I was the first to jump to my feet like popping corn. The parents gave the kids a standing ovation. We took pictures. It was like Halley's comet had just come through the room. We were all so proud. After it was done, I went outside to get some air, and I was chuckling to myself. I thought, We just gave a standing ovation to the worst concert we've ever heard. I just took pictures of the worst concert I've ever heard. Then I thought, But wasn't Amy good? She's cool. Why in the world did I

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applaud? It wasn't because of their performance. It was because that was my little girl up there. I applauded them based not on performance but on relationship."

That's why God applauds you. It has nothing to do with your performance. It has everything to do with the fact that you have a relationship with him and you're his kid. Israel missed God's love because they got it topsy-turvy and insisted that the only thing they could feel good about was their own goodness. So next time your in a deep dark place, an exile place, feeling lost, and worthless, you remember your Dad loves you, and ain't nothin' gonna stop that.

Conclusion: Lots of people stay away from churches and worship services because they assume church is about being a good person, keeping rules. It's upside down, but the concept makes them feel bad about themselves. We, the church have often helped people to see faith upside down, as rule-keeping. Preachers and church leaders (elders, deacons) often make people uncomfortable for the same reason. Rather than pouring out love on people they pour our critique, and point out flaws. So much so that people who need guidance won't talk to the very leaders who pray for them and seek them out, because they assume that what they will experience is rejection and condemnation. Some church members make people uncomfortable for the same reason. They're all about "shoulding" on people: you should do this;

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you shouldn't do that. We can be friends when you do everything you should... Well, we "shouldn't" do that, I'm just saying...

God's love isn't fickle. It doesn't change with the season, or the era, or even with our behavior. It's always been a gift received freely by faith. Receive it. God richly blesses all who call on him (v12)! Make a call. Believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord.

What does that mean? To stop trying save yourself by impressing God with something really good, and start letting God give you forgiveness of sin freely through Jesus.

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Mark 8:35, NIV.

As Paul described it in our text, Jesus came down from heaven to bring us up. He came up from the grave to keep us from going down.

"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the un-righteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit," 1 Peter 3:18, NIV.