



ROMANS Part 91

Chapter 10:6-8

The simplicity and immediacy of faith



Yet the righteousness of faith is saying thus: You may not be saying in your heart, Who will be ascending into heaven?—that is, to be leading Christ down—7 or Who will be descending into the submerged chaos?—that is, to be leading Christ up from among the dead. 8 But what is it saying? Near you is the declaration, in your mouth and in your heart—that is, the declaration of faith which we are heralding...

Paul has brought Christ near to all of us. Because of Paul’s “in your face” testimony, we see Jesus Christ more truly than anyone ever has, even more truly than Jesus’ own disciples saw Him when He walked among them. No prophet of God from Old Testament days has apprehended more clearly the plans and

purposes of God than we. This does not make us better than them, but certainly more ideally placed on the eonian calendar.

CLASSIC HITS

In this section of Romans, Paul borrows from Moses. Reading what Moses wrote will therefore help us understand what appears at first blush to be another strange passage from the apostle of the nations. I myself admit to having struggled with these verses. Moses came to my rescue. Here is Deuteronomy 30:11-14, where Moses speaks to the Israelites concerning the ways of law:

For this instruction what I am enjoining on you today, it is neither too difficult for you, nor is it too far off. It is neither in the heavens for you to say: “Who shall ascend to the heavens for us and take it for us and announce it to us that we may do it?” Nor is it across the sea for you to say: “Who shall cross across the sea for us and take it for us and announce it to us that we may do it?” For the word is exceedingly near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

The idea of this exhortation is—

Quit trying to make this hard, Israel. You don’t have to chase this thing, either up, down or sideways; although I know you want to. I know you. You would rather chase it than attain it. It’s the high adventure of pursuit for you—as long as you never catch the thing. As long as you can dream about the law, talk about it, or hold somber meetings concerning it, then it can never hang you over its hook. You *say* that you want to obey God’s dictates, but that’s only because the dictates, to you, are still afar off; a theoretical wonderland at the end of a noble quest. I know this must come as calamitous news, what I am about to tell you. You would prefer, I realize, to call yet another strategy session, appoint



a committee, send out a search party, order drinks—than to hear that the precepts are now in your midst, deposited before you by a simple man such as myself. Stop looking at the sky, then; look at your dining room table instead and get rid of the idol next to the napkin holder. Stop pondering the possibility of a great nautical adventure in which you will “seek the meaning of everything”—while despising your associates and stealing your neighbor’s wife—because the answer is now graspable. I’ve brought it to you. So honor your parents, starting now. Stop lying to one another and about one another. I can spot a stall tactic from 100 cubits. Do not suppose that the pseudo-nobility of your multi-syllabic pronouncements deceive me concerning you: “We shall cross across the sea” you pronounce ponderously. Oh, how precious! How poetic! How sick! I am not tricked. Stop wasting my time, and yours. Drop the Shakespeare, my people, and see what has come. The law is now chiseled unmistakably in stone. Drop the melodrama; unhand the bacon; let go the bosom of your neighbor’s wife. Fire the planning committee; drop anchor; you’re not going anywhere, and neither shall you be visited by further revelations. The journey is now, and the task at hand.

SIMPLE YET IMPOSSIBLE

In order to grasp Paul’s underlying point, we must ignore for a spell that the law was impossible—and meant to be impossible—for humans to accomplish (Romans 8:3). To quote a famous Personage from the Bible, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). Israel had to learn of this weakness by practical experience. To practicalize it, God presented the law as doable, workable, “right in front of you.” Moses unwittingly furthered God’s hidden intention with the famous speech under discussion. I am sure that Moses himself attempted law, thinking himself up to it. I am just as certain that Moses failed.

On the surface, the law *is* simple and straightforward. How simple is it to not eat pork? Just don’t put the stuff in your mouth. How simple is it to not kill someone? Just walk away and read a book. (It’s actually *hard* to kill someone; you have to go out of your way; you must strain yourself; you must burn calories.) How simple is it to honor your father and mother? Say “good morning” to them and finish your peas. But alas. The prohibition *incited* the sin that would have happily lain dormant and refused pork had

the law not prohibited it (Romans 7:8). Thus God creates the need for a Savior.

PAUL'S TURN

Paul wants to tell the believers in Rome that the righteousness of faith is here and now, in their hearts and in their mouths. When it comes to God, this kind of divine immediacy cuts against the grain. In our experience, God is always “just around the corner,” if not “somewhere over the rainbow.” Humans are idealists and, as such, they want to wait until “all the ducks are lined up” (or God actually shows up), before believing anything, embracing anything, confessing anything, trying anything. Paul won't have it. It is as though he were saying to the Romans—

There is no more need to either seek or wait. It's not as though I'm asking you to do anything. Perhaps that is what you're used to. But no one is requesting a performance here, or a ceremony, or an act. So don't look up, as though someone is requiring you to rise high to find Christ and then bring Him down from heaven. Don't look down, as though Christ were still in the grave needing awakened and pulled up to Earth. He has already *come* down; He has already been *raised* up. God did it all, dear Romans! All that is left for you is to believe. Think of the righteousness of faith as a living thing that is crying out to you. It wants to be embraced here and now. The righteousness of faith is as near as your mouth and as vibrant as your heart. Christ accomplished the righteousness. All that is left for you, dear Romans, is to believe what is done.

“HARD AS HELL”

“Who shall ascend into heaven?” was a Jewish expression drafted to describe any difficult task. To say that something was “as high as heaven” expressed the thought that one had to go to heaven to understand it; in other words, such a thing was impossible. Traveling down into the underworld was equally unfeasible. (Maybe from here comes the expression “hard as hell.”)

Job suggests these very thoughts in Job 11:7-8. I like the poetry of these four lines, especially of the last two—

Can you discover the depths of God?
Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?
They are high as the heavens, what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?

The law was nothing like this, said Moses. Not only was the law *not* impossible to understand, it was plain and intelligible, placed before the eyes and in reach of the hands. Those who would rather seek high, low or across for it would cherish such adventures in vain.

If this were true of the law of Moses, how much more is it of Paul's gospel of grace, which is completely untrammelled by works. Paul borrows these words, not to suggest that Moses saw ahead to his ministry, but to show that *not* having to go anywhere for divine revelation very well expresses the language and design of faith.

Don't let religion trick you, then, into thinking that you must either ascend to heaven or suffer the depths of its fictitious hell in order to either find or win Christ. Before any of us were born, Jesus Christ came from heaven and suffered the pangs of death for our sakes. With His resurrection from the dead we became, to Him, a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:14-17). Deliverance is here.

Talk about armchair salvation. —MZ



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email: mzender@martinzender.com