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WHAT THE ELK NEEDED

Romans 10

A curious aspect of our culture is something I call word inflation. Words like super and outstanding and brilliant are often applied to things that are actually just positive or good. A classic example is awesome. Once we were at a restaurant and I observed a couple come in and request a table. They were told it would be about a 20 minute wait. They were just sitting down to wait when the hostess said, “Actually I can seat you now.” The man said, “That’s awesome!” Really? The definition of awesome is “extremely impressive or daunting, inspiring great admiration, apprehension or fear.” Not having to wait for a table causes you to be in awe? Seems to me you must be very easily impressed.

Another example of this is the word emergency. The definition of the word is, “a serious, unexpected and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action.” Our son has numerous stories of patients he sees in the emergency department who seem to have inflated that definition to include almost anything, including the most trivial of issues. This is also reported by 911 operators, who get way too many calls that you might label “interesting.” Operators in Dacula, Georgia received a call from a woman who reported that her car had been stolen. A couple of hours later she called back and said that it hadn’t actually been stolen. She had found it. It was in her yard but she couldn’t see it because the weeds were so tall they covered it. A man in a Southern California beach town called 911 because he had spotted a bear in his back yard. Police responded quickly. It wasn’t a bear. It was a possum. A regular sized possum. One woman called 911 on her phone to report that she couldn’t remember the phone’s pass code!

There was a man in Jacksonville, Florida who called 911 upset because the employees at the deli where he was buying a sandwich weren’t making it right. Such things are absurd because we know that 911 is supposed to be exclusively for emergency situations. It is the number one dials when they need to be rescued. I bring this up because Romans 10, which we will look at today, is about being a real emergency. It is about a need for a 911 call if ever there was one because this is about people needing to be rescued. It is a message about the dire condition of every human being, but also about the hope and the help that is available to us.

EVERYONE NEEDS TO BE RESCUED

Paul says in verse 1, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” This returns to what Paul said in 9:2-4, “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 people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” Paul loved his fellow Jews and had great sorrow because they were mostly rejecting Christ. Paul’s great desire for them is that they might be saved. This tells us that these people need to be saved. They needed to be rescued from a dangerous and dire situation.

This idea of being saved is kind of strange. It smacks of religious fanatics buttonholing you and telling you that you need to be saved, brother. Saved from what? We have seen lots of movies and TV shows where someone needed to be saved. They are hanging onto a ledge, about to fall into an abyss, and they need someone to grab them, pull them up and save them. They are surrounded by bad guys who are about to seriously injure them or even kill them, and they need someone to come to their rescue. We’ve seen scenarios like those in movies and TV, but we’ve never been personally in one of them. I can’t think of any instances where someone has literally saved my life or I would have died. Laurie has saved me from many mistakes and my own stupidity more times than I can count, but I don’t think that’s what Paul had in mind.

So what’s this about being saved? Why does anyone need to be saved and what are they being saved from? Luke 19:1-10 tells the story of Zaccheus, a Jewish man who was a resident of the famous city of Jericho. Zaccheus had lost his soul. He cheated, abused and betrayed his own people in the pursuit of money for himself. He was detested. In our society today you’d have to think of maybe a sex trafficker, a human smuggler, maybe a drug dealer. He might even have been as low as a politician or a lawyer in our society’s estimation. Though he told himself he didn’t care, he knew he was lost and there was no hope for him. But to his astonishment, the dynamic, miracle working rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, came to town and brought him hope. It revolutionized Zaccheus’ life. In an instant he was a changed man.

Jesus said in Luke 19:9-10, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus said people are lost and the reason he came into the world was to rescue them. John 3:17 says of Jesus, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” That verse says the world, all the people in it, need to be rescued because they are lost.

It doesn’t look like most people are lost and need to be rescued. No one wears a sign saying, “Please save me, I’m lost.” Most people seem to be pretty nice. They generally seem to be happy with their lives. In fact, I suspect most people would be offended if you said they were lost and needed to be saved. So what does it mean to be lost and in need of rescue?

There is a woman named Mary McLaurine who has an unusual condition called developmental topographical disorientation. She has no internal compass and she can’t form a mental map or image of her surroundings. Everywhere she goes is new and unfamiliar to her, no matter how often she has been there. She is always lost. Recently she stayed at a friend’s home. She went for a walk, but when she started back she had no idea where she was. She says, “I was only blocks from where I had started my walk, but I was lost. Fear and adrenaline pulsed through my veins and I began sweating profusely. My surroundings looked completely unfamiliar. It was as though I’d been dropped into the middle of a foreign land.” She did make it back with someone’s help. But this is her plight. People with her condition get lost every day in the most familiar surroundings. She says, “Those of us with this disorder are often left with feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation and self doubt.”

That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? Being lost ranges from terrifying to frustrating. Imagine going through life not knowing where you are or where you are going and having no way to find out. Perhaps you seek help in some way from other people, from books, from ideas, but none of it helps. You end up still lost. As Mary McLaurine said that can produce feelings of anxiety, isolation, depression and self doubt. It is miserable. But people aren’t really going around feeling that all the time. So why are you talking about this, Rick?

People feel it more than you might think. In March Fox news had a story about Corey Brooks, a pastor who spent much of the past winter living in a tent on a roof top in south Chicago as a way to raise awareness of the poverty and violence in the south side neighborhoods. He described a meeting he had been a part of a few years ago. The mayor of the city at the time met with a group of pastors. This was after a couple of brutal, execution style murders had occurred in the city and he was clearly discouraged. The mayor said, “Our city is in a mess. There’s violence. We don’t have answers to this. We can try to police it. We can try to educate it. We can try to create business opportunities, but we have a soul problem. Gentlemen and ladies, what you have to offer is really the answer.”

He said we have a soul problem. He was saying the real issue is that people are lost, and the effect of that is playing out in the city. At its core the human condition is a spiritual and soul problem that will not yield to human answers. Education and policing won’t fix it, nor will money or opportunity. People’s souls need to be fixed. We are lost, and need to be saved.

Everyone is looking for something. They often have no idea exactly what it is they are looking for, but they are trying to find that illusive something. In many ways others are telling us how to get to wherever that something is. The problem is when we follow these versions of Google Maps we discover they’ve done to us exactly what Google Maps did to Laurie and me once in Arizona. We get to the place where the something is supposed to be and there’s nothing there. Remember how Mary McLaurine described what it is like to always feel lost because you don’t know where you are and how to get where you need to go. She said it leaves her with feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation and self-doubt. How much of those things do you think people are experiencing? It’s a lot. It’s everywhere.

People are involved in frantic, almost desperate pursuits and efforts looking for something. They are looking because they are lost and trying to solve that problem. They try many different philosophies, they try medicating themselves, they try achievement or accumulation, hectic busyness, they try pleasure and comfort. All of these things are ultimately aimed at saving themselves. Add to that the problem that is the final issue for human beings. That issue is hope in the face of death. Being lost means you have no answer for that problem, and that is the biggest, most intractable problem for every human being.

I recently read a story I found kind of humorous, though in a sense it is tragic. The story was about General George Custer. In the spring of 1867, he was leading his regiment on a scouting expedition on the plains of Kansas. Custer had a couple of prize English greyhound dogs who were with him. That day his dogs saw an antelope and took off after it, chasing it over a hill. Custer was a sort of hair-on-fire, go for the gusto kind of guy. He couldn’t help himself. He took off on his horse, joining the chase with his dogs, for the moment, leaving his regiment. As soon as he went over the hill he forgot all about the antelope, his men, and his mission because he saw an enormous bull buffalo. He instantly took off after it because as an avid hunter he just had to have this animal as a trophy. He yelled in his excitement, pulled out his pearl-handled pistol, and prepared to shoot the beast. He thundered along on his horse right next to the buffalo and shoved his gun right into the animal’s side. However, as if knowing what Custer was intending, the buffalo suddenly turned toward the general’s horse. The horse veered violently away from the buffalo and when Custer grabbed the reins to try to get control of the horse it caused him to accidentally pull the trigger. In all the upheaval he had lost control of where he was aiming his gun, and his bullet went straight at his horse’s head and killed it. Custer was thrown to the ground as his horse went down and he found himself staring at the animal that he had just been trying to kill. The buffalo just looked at him for a moment, then turned and walked away. Custer was left to make the long walk back to his men all by himself. Custer’s rashness would lead to doom for himself and his men a few years later.

I thought of that story because it reminds me of what is happening with people all around us. They are in the mad pursuit of something they think they want, maybe it will save them, when in fact it is dooming them.

THERE ARE TWO APPROACHES TO BEING SAVED

Paul says in verse 2 that his fellow Jewish people were zealous for God. They knew that the salvation they needed had to do with him. To be estranged from him is the root cause of being lost. But Paul then made the controversial claim that their zeal, “is not based on knowledge.” In other words, they were zealous, but they were zealously wrong. They didn’t believe the truth. This brings us to a fork in the road. That fork is the claim that there is a right and a wrong when it comes to God, and that to be wrong is to be doomed to being lost, potentially forever. This is where Paul parts ways with our culture.

Our culture’s cherished belief is that there is no wrong when it comes to spiritual or moral issues. There is no one truth. Each person has his or her own personal beliefs and they are all equally valid. We have a new roommate at our house. Her name is Alexa. Our granddaughter, Ella, urged Laurie repeatedly that we had to have Alexa. We are starting quite a collection of know it all women. We have Siri on our phones and Alexa in our kitchen. It’s a little creepy that there’s this artificial intelligence listening to everything we say in the kitchen. But then I envision some government snoop in some secret facility listening to us and saying, “Well the Myatts are doing another crossword puzzle.” I guess I’m not too worried about that. Laurie likes to provoke reactions, even from Alexa. So yesterday she said, “Alexa, do you believe in God?” Alexa said, “People have many different thoughts about religion.” Now there’s a wishy washy theological statement. That’s about all Laurie could get out of her. People have different beliefs. That’s the modern message.

In these verses Paul makes a radical claim that it is possible to be devout and zealous, but wrong. He is claiming there is a right and a wrong, and if one chooses the wrong way then one will be as lost as a person who physically goes down the wrong road. It’s easy to understand why people might say there is no right or wrong in these matters. The thinking of people about spiritual and moral matters is all over the map. Alexa is right. There is a bewildering proliferation of different ideas about how to connect to God, and about how to get out of the condition of being lost, and whether that has anything to do with God. There are literally billions of people who are taking what Paul claims are wrong paths. We encounter them constantly, and many are wonderful people. One day when Laurie and I were having a few days off in the desert recently we were reading out by the pool and I noticed an older man walk by. He had numerous tattoos, but one caught my attention. On his forearm he had one that had a circle and inside the circle was a cross, then there was a red slash through the circle and the cross. He was wearing on his body a loud, permanent statement that he wanted nothing to do with Christ, and would like to see faith in Christ completely disappear from the planet.

Given that the majority of the human race does not agree with what Paul taught, and that the majority of people in our culture do not even think that there is a right or wrong approach to being saved, why should we accept that there is one truth crucial to being saved? A little while back Laurie mentioned in church one Sunday that it was International Bat Appreciation Day. Yes, April 17 is Bat Appreciation Day. This day has been a problem for Laurie and me ever since our encounter with a bat in the middle of the night 5 years go. We absolutely did not appreciate that bat, and still do not appreciate them. Yes, I know they play an important role in the ecosystem, but I’d prefer they do it far from me. Right around that time we were watching a medical drama on TV. In one particular episode the doctors were at first puzzled by a patient’s symptoms because they’d never seen this set of symptoms before. But soon they realized he had rabies. They’d never personally seen a case of rabies. The patient insisted he had not been bitten by any animal, so how could he have rabies? The doctors correctly informed him that bats, which often carry rabies, have such fine teeth that you can be bitten by one and not know it. On the show the doctors, out of desperation, tried to save the patient through a radical and dangerous hail mary kind of treatment, and though for a time it looked grim, they saved the patient’s life, and he recovered. That was a nice story. Here’s the reality. Every year 59,000 people die of rabies. In my lifetime alone over 4 million people have died of rabies. In all of history, only 14 people have survived rabies. Out of the thousands, millions, who have had it, only 14 people have miraculously survived. That’s why the day after our bat encounter, our son informed us that we needed rabies shots right away because once you get symptoms, the disease is 100% fatal. You will die. The show we watched presented an idea that doesn’t work in the real world. The doctors can’t save a patient who has rabies. There is no treatment. We encountered some people in the area where we had our bat experience who scoffed at the idea that we needed rabies shots. They didn’t think it was a big deal. So there were two possible belief systems there. One held by those locals, and one held by our doctor son. Here’s the question. Are those equally valid? Is one’s ideas just as good as another’s? Here’s the hard reality. There is truth. In rabies, believing the wrong thing, not believing the truth, is deadly. I read a news story not long ago about a man who had exactly the same experience with a bat that we did not far from the area where we had our encounter. He said it was no big deal and didn’t need rabies shots. He died of the disease. That is how the world works. Truth is not relative. It makes no sense that in spiritual matters it is somehow different.

Paul claimed that his own people were on the wrong track. Verse 3 tells us what that track was. “Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” What does that mean? Remember we saw earlier in Romans that the need for Righteousness is at the core of the human condition. It is a fundamental struggle for us. It is about being approved, being accepted, having worth. It is to be saved from being rejected, worthless, condemned and ultimately without hope. It is to be rescued when we are totally lost. It is a deep and desperate need for every human being.

The key idea in the wrong approach to righteousness was they “sought to establish their own” righteousness. That means they tried to save themselves. This is at the heart of one approach to rescue. It is that we have to save ourselves. That is the default approach of human nature. We sense that something is wrong, so we try to fix it. That is the natural way to do things. We think it is up to us. Most philosophical and theological systems have this idea at their root. But this approach, whatever the particular form it might exist in, has one fatal flaw. The fatal flaw is, it doesn’t work.

We can’t do what is required to save ourselves. Religions usually run headlong into this problem, and in an effort to get around it, turn religion into a series of rules, rites, and rituals that a person can conform to at least to some extent. But that usually requires hollowing out real goodness.

Here’s an odd example of what I mean. There is something in the city of New York that I am willing to bet you have never noticed if you have been there. Strung between utility poles in Manhattan there is some translucent wire. It stretches for 18 miles, basically encircling Manhattan. It is called an eruv. What is that about? It is about the Jewish Sabbath. According to the rabbis to observe the Sabbath one must not work. They say that carrying anything outside of one’s home is work, thus a violation of the Sabbath. So carrying house keys, a book, an infant, even a cane, outside one’s home would be violating the Sabbath. Carrying them inside one’s home is acceptable, outside is not. The eruv was put in place to act as a boundary that turns the streets of the city into one’s own space, much like one’s home. Thus, it is determined, as long as one stays within the boundary of the eruv, one can carry outside whatever is necessary on the Sabbath.

This is the kind of mental gymnastics that start happening when people try to “save” themselves. The fact that this approach doesn’t work should not surprise us. A person who is in need of rescue cannot save himself or herself. If they could, they wouldn’t need to be rescued.

In his book, *Shrink*, Tim Suttle wrote at one point about people getting lost in the Rocky Mountains. He referred to a woman named Sallie who is part of a search and rescue team. She and other search and rescue experts say that the key to survival often is knowing and admitting you are lost and need help. They say lost children are more often found and rescued than adults. That’s because kids are quick to admit they need help, so they don’t make the situation worse. They typically curl up in a sheltered place and wait for rescuers. Adults try to save themselves and make it harder to find them.

That brings us to a different way of trying to gain righteousness. Paul says what we need to do is let God rescue us through Christ. This is the Gospel of grace, which Paul has been presenting throughout Romans. In verses 5-7 Paul quotes some passages from Deuteronomy 30 about ascending to heaven or descending into the deep. The point is that righteousness by faith, the Gospel, says, “Don’t try to gain righteousness through those kinds of extraordinary efforts because it won’t work. In verse 8 Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:14, saying, “The word is near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart.” In other words, this truth, this approach to being rescued, is very accessible. It is something available and possible for any and every human being.

Verse 9 spells it out. “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” There are no steps, no rituals, no rules. There is only faith. There is only believing that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, which means believing that he did die for our sins, and that he was who he claimed to be, God in human form. Truly believing that means being willing to admit openly that Jesus is Lord, he is God with us, God who came to save us.

That’s it. It is simple. It is clear. And it is possible. It means believing God’s promise, that if we trust in that simple truth, we will be saved. We will be forgiven, declared righteous by God, adopted by him as his children, given a new life, included in his kingdom, and we will live in his kingdom forever.

This is the other side of the coin from chapter 9. There we saw that God chooses sovereignly. Here Paul says every human has a choice. The word of hope is near to everyone of us. We can all choose to believe in our heart and admit with our mouth Jesus is Lord. Anyone can do that. But how does that fit with God choosing? In human thinking those two don’t go together. It’s got to be one or the other. But God says his thoughts are not our thoughts, our ways are not his ways. In other words, he can do things we can’t figure out. This is one of them.

There was a news story that came out last November about a bull elk in Colorado that was seen periodically over a period of 2 years with a large rubber tire around its neck. The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Department finally was able to capture the animal, which turned out to be 4 years old and weighed 600 pounds. They sedated the animal, then cut off his antlers. They would have preferred to cut the tire, but it had steel belts and they couldn’t cut it. The only way they could get it off the elk’s neck was to cut his antlers, and that left barely enough room to pull the tire off. The tire was full of wet pine needles and dirt. It had 10 pounds of debris in it. They had no idea how the tire got on the animal’s neck but it must have made life miserable. Within minutes of coming out of the sedation the bull was back on his feet.

The animal could not save himself. He had to be rescued. There was nothing he could do to fix the problem. It had to be done for him, and he had no part in it. That’s pretty much true of us and of the good news of grace in Christ. God has done the work for us. We do the one thing we can all do. We believe God’s promise and claim it.

SOMEONE NEEDS TO TELL THEM

Verse 14 summarizes Paul’s main point in the rest of this chapter. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” Someone has to tell them. Paul was explaining why he did what he now did. He used to be a Jewish rabbi, but now he had a new calling and ministry. He was called to be one who would bring the good news of rescue in Christ to people who did not believe. But verse 21 tells us that Paul understood his message would be received more by Gentiles than Jews. In that verse he quoted Isaiah 65:2. “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” In other words, Paul was not surprised that his people were rejecting God’s truth. As Isaiah pointed out, they had been doing that for a long time. This was nothing new.

There is an implication that we should also be telling others about the Good News of Christ. This is only reasonable. If you have been rescued, don’t you want to tell other people who are lost about that rescue so they can be saved too? That’s only natural for human beings. But please notice that’s not Paul’s point in this passage. He’s not telling us why we should preach the Gospel, he’s explaining why he had to.

This tends to be a big time guilt producer for many Christians. We know we should be telling others about Jesus, but it’s hard for us and we don’t feel like we’re very good at it. There are some truths that can ease our guilt about this. Remember God is sovereign. He chooses, and our failures are not going to thwart his choices. In other words, no one is going to be left out of the kingdom of God because we didn’t tell them.

Second, some people are gifted by God to be evangelists. Paul was called to his ministry by God and gifted for it. Most of us are not going to have those gifts. Don’t feel guilty about not doing something that God hasn’t given you either the gifts or the calling to do. Laurie loves me more than I can express to you and she tells me often how wonderful she thinks I am. However, I know there are some things about me that disappoint her. One of them is that I’m not an addict. The addiction I refer to here is coffee. She loves coffee and wishes I could join her in her love for the nasty stuff. Another one is that there have been several occasions when she has said, “Rick, we should sing this song together.” I can sing, mostly, but not beautifully, or even very well. God did not gift me with a good singing voice. He does not expect me to sing beautifully, because he didn’t give me that ability. So deal with it, Laurie. You can’t expect it either. God doesn’t expect you to do something that he has not called and gifted you to do.

There is a verse that is addressed to every believer about sharing the good news of Jesus. It is 1 Peter 3:15. “Revere in your hearts Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” What we all should do, every believer, is have hope. As we live in hope people might see it and ask about it. Here's your job. Answer them when they ask, and do it gently. Explain how Christ gives you hope that is found nowhere else.

IMPLICATIONS

BEING LOST IS THE ROOT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Every bit of the suffering, confusion, struggle, doubt, anxiety, frustration, restlessness, isolation and hopelessness that humans experience is rooted in being lost. It comes from being cut off from God, alienated from him, losing a sense of our true identity, having no hope and no real sense of our value. Any human efforts to alleviate the human condition without addressing the root will inevitably fall way short. Like treating the symptoms of a disease, it may provide some temporary alleviation of the symptom, but it will not cure the problem. We need to remember this.

We need to remember that at the core our problems, are soul problems. When we experience the symptoms of lostness ourselves, it is likely that we are living like lost people. Something has gotten out of whack down at the core of our being. We need to return to the truth of our rescue in Christ as the foundation for the solution to our problems. We also need to see whatever problems others we know might have, at the root, are spiritual issues. It is about being lost. We need to remember they will not be healed until that foundational problem is resolved.

LIVING IN THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL IS THE KEY TO LIFE

The human default is we try to save ourselves. We try to look for the things we have to do to fix ourselves, the steps we must take or rules we must follow. Paul has made very clear, the answer for us is to believe and confess that Jesus is Lord. It is to living believing that he is Lord, and to know that by believing God’s promise we are saved.

WE SHOULD DO WHAT WE CAN TO BRING THE NEWS TO OTHERS

There are two main things that every one of us can do. First, we can pray for others. Remember it takes a sovereign, powerful work of God’s Spirit to bring to life those who are spiritually dead. There is nothing we can do to make that happen, other than pray. So we absolutely should pray for people.

Second, we should live in hope. Have you ever had a problem that seemed hopeless, that you had tried everything to resolve and nothing worked, and then someone told you how they had found a solution? They gave you hope! That makes all the difference.

We should live in the joy and peace of the hope we have by grace. What does that look like? It doesn’t mean life is always perfect for us. It doesn’t mean we don’t feel the pain of losses and disappointments or that nothing is ever hard. It means that we are pressed down but not crushed. That we know God is with us, and he will bring good out of all that happens. It means we have peace and rejoice in his love. We don’t have to convince others, we don’t have to change them, we just have to be able to tell them where our hope comes from and why when they see it and ask. It starts with actually having real hope, and being close enough and open enough with people to let them see it.