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How Did Jews Attain Righteousness before Christ?

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Questions about how Jews attained righteousness before Christ and what Romans 9:32 means when it says the Jews “did not pursue [righteousness] by faith, but as though it were by works.”

* What does Romans 9:32 mean when it says the Jews “did not pursue [righteousness] by faith, but as though it were by works,” and how did Jews attain righteousness before Christ?

Transcript

[Music] This is Amy Hall and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRaskpodcast. And with me is Greg Koukl. And with me is famous Amos.

Alright Greg, let's go to a question from C. Cooper. In Romans 9:32, what does it mean that Old Testament Jews "did not pursue righteousness by faith?" In other words, how did Jews attain righteousness before Christ? Well, this is a very good question because it's foundational. And I think it's often misunderstood and understandably so.

Because there are so many passages that speak about salvation that talk about different aspects of it. I think the clearest statement of these kinds of things, Amy, is in your favorite book, which is the book, the question comes from, the book of Romans. And what's interesting about the book of Romans when it touches on the question of salvation, is that it goes back to the beginning, to the archetype.

The archetype of trusting in God for salvation is Abraham. Abraham didn't know about Jesus all those details. Although Jesus does say in a sense, enigmatically, Abraham rejoiced to see my day and was glad of it.

So there was some sense of understanding that Abraham knew someone was going to come and rescue. And we see the details there in Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 through 3, which is the Abrahamic covenant. And please listeners understand that those three verses are the hinge pin of the rest of Scripture.

Everything that follows is based on this rescue plan that God describes in very simple terms to Abraham and how he will raise up a nation through Abraham so that all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And then there's a repetition of that because there's confusion in Abraham's mind because he has no children. And in chapter 18, there's a repetition.

And that God says, "No, these people will come forth from your own loins." So he's talking about physical descendants there, not kind of a spiritual descendant, so to speak. Like Eliezer of Damascus might have been, and that was what was raised by Abraham regarding the promise. I don't have a child.

No, you're going to. And then the text says, "And Abraham believed God." In other words, he put his complete trust in God's promise of a provision for the salvation of the world, which would include the salvation of Jews who participated, which would include the first Jew Abraham himself. Okay.

And this is the passage that in the text there then says, "It was reckoned unto him as righteousness." It was reckoned to him. In other words, it was credited to his account. All right.

Now, there's a long history then of this being played out through the development of the nation of Israel and all the kings. And all the details you read in the Old Testament, but everything is kind of hinging from this. And even though there is a mechanism that God puts in place, called the Mosaic Law, which provides a picture of substitutionary atonement, and a whole complex system of laws to keep, to maintain their spiritual purity and to live righteous lives, their salvation was never dependent on their ability to keep the laws, or else there wouldn't be laws that may provision for forgiveness through sacrifice.

And so at the core, even for the Jews with the law, it was their faith that by pursuing this sacrificial system, which was temporary, and the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 10, makes us clear, that in doing these things, that was their act of trust that God would use the substitute to cover their sins, not take it away, just to cover it, because that wasn't an adequate sacrifice. Animals, as I think I say in the story of reality, animals can't pay for people. A person must pay for a person, and then this brings us to the New Testament.

But the key here is, is that it is once trust in God's provision for salvation, that is the vehicle for their justification. And of course Paul develops that idea in Romans chapter 4 and in other chapters as well. But what he says there, for him who works, it is reckoned to him as what is due.

If you work for something, then whoever you're working for owes it to you. But for him who does not work, now Paul isn't saying that we shouldn't be righteous, but he's talking

about the means of justification. But for them who does not work, but believes or trust into in God who justifies the unrighteous to him, it's reckoned as righteousness.

Now what happened in the Old Testament is that the mechanism by which they were to receive forgiveness, the sacrificial system, needed to be embraced with an attitude of faith and trust. Instead it became an end in itself. If I do these religious activities, then I am going to, then I'm going to be okay.

And so it was turned into a system of works, a de facto system of works. I was raised Roman Catholic. We had all the statements of Jesus being Savior, but it was very clear to me, de facto, in other words, an actual practice that one was saved by their behaviors.

And so it was the same as it was in our faith, but it was our behaviors that saved us. Now I think the proper relationship between actions and behaviors are indicative of that is once you are regenerate in virtue of your faith in Christ, things are going to change. And your heart is on a trajectory after the spirit, Paul says in Romans 8, not after the flesh.

And therefore that's going to be exemplified in our behavior. Our behavior will indicate where our true trust lies. Here's what Paul is talking about here is what I was referring to just a moment ago, that you have a system that is meant to be pursued by faith, and the system becomes the measure or the means of justification instead of the faith.

And there are a number of places in the New Testament where this characterization is made. Romans has some of them, Hebrews has some of them in early part of Hebrews. Why do they die in the wilderness? Because they were disobedient.

And what were they disobedient? They were disobedient in faith is the way cash is out there. And in Galatians has things like this as well. It's not just the Jews, it's even Protestant denominations fall into this habit of thinking, "Okay, there it is, good Samaritan.

That's a morality tale. Now I've got to live like that. That's how I get justified.

I've got the two great commandments. That's how I get justified." Now I get justified. No, the two great commandments were shown by Jesus there in the Gospels as an evidence that you cannot keep the law adequate to save yourself.

And you have to put your trust in God's provision. When that happens, you have in the New Testament economy, there's a regeneration. Something changes inside radically and puts you on a new course and gives you a new power to overcome and fulfill the spirit of the law.

Galatians 5, you know, at the end of that, 5 he says, "Look at those who are in the spirit are walking according to the spirit, or being led by the spirit. It all means the same thing. It's not an nudge, nudge.

Go take this job or marry that woman. That's not Paul means. It means that you are putting to death the deeds of the flesh, his language in Romans 8, to the phrase led by the spirit.

And then you are naturally fulfilling the things of the law. That's why you're not under the law in Galatians 5. You're not under the law when you're walking by the spirit. You're led by the spirit.

Why? Because you're doing the things of the law naturally requires in terms of the progressively righteous life that you're living in sanctification. So I probably said more than I need to say and maybe I stole some of your thunder here, Amy, because this is one of her favorite passage. I'm just thinking of a million things I want to say because this chapter, chapter 9, comes after an entire argument that is leading up to this part.

So you have touched on most of what I wanted to say, but let me, I just want to read the passage really quickly that he's referring to. Let's see. What should we say then that Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith, but Israel pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive at that law? Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works.

So everything you said, Greg explains what he's talking about here. Paul has just finished explaining how the law cannot enable us to be righteous. He talks about this in chapters 7. And he just talks about how the law is good, the law represents what we ought to do, but it has no power to enable us to follow it.

And as you said, Greg, our righteousness, leading up to this, he's explained that our righteousness comes from faith. You mentioned Romans 4, and I recommend that you read through chapter 4, C. Cooper. It talks about how faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.

And then he explains, but when was it credited after he was circumcised or before he was circumcised? And he says, it was before the righteousness came from faith before the law. The law came in after the righteousness by faith. And then he says, for the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

For those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified. Why? Because you cannot attain it by law, period. By grace you are saved through faith.

It's not of yourselves. It is a gift of God. Let's know in both.

So what had happened was that many of the Jews had lost sight of this. So you'll see this throughout the Bible where God will say, I hate your sacrifices. Stop doing these sacrifices.

Stop doing these acts of the law when they're not accompanied by faith. Because that is not what they're for. That is not going to make you righteous.

So this all leads up to this. Jesus mentions this too. He talks about God rejecting the sacrifices God requires or can try it hard.

Does Jesus ever say that? Or am I thinking of something else? That's Psalm 51. Oh, okay. But he doesn't quote that? I don't know.

I don't think Jesus cites that. But I have some thoughts about Jesus' comments because they dovetail here and some people have hijacked Jesus for the law. Legalistic purposes and I'll give some illustrations how that's a misreading of Jesus.

Okay. So hold on to that thought. So all throughout the Gospels what you will see is Jesus making the case that faith is what's important.

So when he condemns the Pharisees and he commends even Gentiles who have faith. So even the Gentiles who are outside of the law when they have faith in God, they are made righteous by that. So there is so much, there is so much in the Bible about the law.

And I think a lot of times when we don't read straight through it, we miss what's going on here because there's a lot of explanation given about this. And I wanted to mention one other passage that I think could be really helpful here and that's Galatians 3. And what Galatians 3 says again, like in Romans 4, that the law came in after the covenant made with Abraham and was meant to show them their sin so that they would be brought to Christ for their righteousness. That's a tutor.

So that's another book that goes into this topic. Psalm 51 by the way, it's interesting. It's a well-known passage that most people don't forget where it was and don't get their new testimony.

And they'll get their new testament and their old testament mixed up. Just saying. Friendly, jibing here.

Anyway, it says, "For you do not delight and sacrifice, otherwise I would give it. You are not pleased with an offering. Sacrifices of God are a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart.

Oh God, you will not despise." Then it says, "Once that is accomplished, then you will delight in righteous sacrifices in burnt offerings and whole burnt offering. Then young bulls will be offered on your altar." The relationship there is identified. And I'm going back also now to Jesus because some people think that Paul's message, the message of the gospel, we understand as Paul, not Jesus.

Who were the biggest enemies of Jesus? The Pharisees. Who were the most religious and

assiduous about keeping the law? The Pharisees. In other words, if legalism was the right root, these were the people.

But Jesus said, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees." That's in Matthew 5, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And then he puts things into perspective. The law requires perfection.

Read through that first section. You losses don't commit adultery. All right? "Well, I haven't done that.

Do you ever think about it?" "Oh, yeah, you're going to hell." The losses don't murder. I didn't do that. Do you ever call your brother an idiot? You're going to hell.

That's Jesus. I'm not making that up. It's a little bit of a paraphrase, but it's true to the content.

Okay? And then he says, "You ought to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." He is making clear the demands of the law. And then a magnificent parable, Jesus tells, of a Pharisee in the front of the synagogue and a tax gatherer in the back. And the Pharisee is reporting on all of the ways that he keeps the law.

And the tax gatherer is beating his breast, won't even lift his eyes to heaven, and said, "God, have mercy on me." A sinner. And Jesus said, "It is the tax gatherer in the back of the synagogue that was justified, and not the legalistic law abiding Pharisee in the front of the synagogue." So Jesus, in these instances, you find all these steps are Paul systematizes it in Romans. But what he systematizes is the same theology that Jesus is teaching in the New Testament, in the Gospels.

I remember what I was thinking of, because I had something in the back of my mind that Jesus says over and over. And it's when he says, "I desire compassion, not sacrifice." Oh, that's right. When God says that.

He says that to the Pharisees who were so concerned about following these laws that they missed the matters of the heart. And so that's, I think that's what I was thinking of. Well, that's a good observation.

That was when there was a person on the Sabbath who had a withered hand, and he talks to the Pharisees, "Is it okay to heal on the Sabbath?" And they were silent and made him angry. And after he healed on the Sabbath, they wanted to kill him. You know.

So, I just realized to sum up, the righteousness was always through Christ, even before Christ because it was by grace. You know, in Romans 3, where it says, "He's demonstrating his righteousness because he," I can't think of the exact words right now, "but he overlooked." He passed over the sins formerly committed. Right.

So, he passed over those sins for those who came before Christ because when Christ came, he would be the demonstration of God's righteousness on the cross. Just think of a credit card. I think it's the best illustration.

It's like the credit card was used in the Old Testament, but Jesus paid the bill for that credit card. And a lot of times when it was used, even with my kids, you know, they don't know when I paid the bill or where they know there's a bill kind of, but they're not thinking about it. They just know that that card gets them what they're, you know, their meal or whatever it is that I'm purchasing.

And the same thing. Dad is taking care of them, but they don't know the metrics financially of it until the credit card's paid. In the same way God's overlooking, he's providing the benefit, the payment comes on the cross for past and future.

So to answer your question, the Jews attained righteousness through Christ even before Christ. So hopefully that clears it up. And now, Greg, we only have a minute left because... Well, it was well spent.

And as far as I'm concerned, and see Cooper, I appreciate the question because it is so foundational to our convictions. And there are so many people who get this wrong. And not only as Christians live a frustrated life, but some miss real Christianity completely because they don't see how this works in the Scriptures.

Well, you get us started talking about the gospel and Romans. And that's what you get. There you go.

You get the entire show on one question. All right. Well, thank you so much, see Cooper.

If you would like to ask your question, you can send that to us on Twitter with the hashtag #strask. Or you can go to our website if you go to str.org and you go to our podcast page, you look up #strask. You'll see a link there.

And you can send in a question for me and for Greg, and we will consider it for the show. Sure. All right.

Thank you for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Koko for Stand to Reason.

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