

ROMANS 9–11

Justification by Faith and the Hope of Israel

If Romans 8 has taken the reader out of the shadows into the sunlight, Romans 9 begins with an emotional plunge from triumph to tragedy. Romans 8 was a wonderful chapter of assurance—the assurance of final victory—concluding with the challenging and climactic passage on the security of those who are in Christ Jesus (31–39; cf. 1). Nothing, Paul concluded, “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (38f).

But what of those who are not in Christ Jesus; who are not “baptized into Christ Jesus” (6:3), but reject the Christ? And in particular, what about those who had been “intrusted with the oracles of God” (3:2) and the promises of the Christ (or Messiah), but then rejected that Christ when he appeared and found themselves outside the kingdom? Romans 9 begins by quickly putting this great tragedy before the reader.

Paul has argued from the outset that the gospel had been “promised afore through God’s prophets in the holy scriptures” (1:2); that the righteousness manifested in the gospel was “witnessed by the law and the prophets” (3:21). Yet most of the people to whom the oracles of God were intrusted (3:2) had rejected the gospel. They had not experienced the blessings of the messianic era.

What possibly could be the explanation? Paul begins by denying that the word of God had failed (9:6–13); then clears God of any suspicion of unrighteousness (9:14–29); places the responsibility for Israel’s lost condition where it rightly belongs (9:30–10:21); and demonstrates that salvation was still possible for Israel (11:1–32). The section concludes with an outburst of praise for the God whose unsearchable wisdom was behind this marvellous purpose being worked out in history (11:33–36).

Paul's Sorrow for Israel (9:1–5)

These opening verses quickly introduce the problem to be discussed in Romans 9–11. One cannot continue from Romans 8 on into Romans 9 without sensing he has passed over a vast gulf. It is as though Paul has reached an emotional mountain peak as he writes of the security of God's elect in Christ (8:31–39) only to be brought down to earth by the memory of Israel's tragic lost state (9:1–5).

Strong Protestation of Heartfelt Sorrow and Pain Over Israel (1–2)

Why does Paul so strongly insist upon the truth of his claim here? It is as though he thought he might not be believed. Perhaps it is due to the way his relations with the Israelites had been broken off in city after city and the way they had persecuted him (Acts 13:44–52; 14:1–7, 19; 17:1–9, 13; 18:5f, 12–17; 19:8f). Add to that the Jewish charges that he was a renegade Jew, a turncoat, a traitor to his people and his heritage, which are brought out later in Acts (21:17–29; 22:22; 24:1–9). For Paul's answer, see Acts 22:1–21; 23:1; 24:10–21; 25:7f; 26:1–23.

Time and again Paul had turned his back on the Jews and turned to the Gentiles. But this turning from Israel was no doubt always painfully felt by Paul and he did not want it to be misunderstood (cf. Rom. 11:13f).

The Depth of Paul's Feeling for Israel (3)

Paul would have given up his own salvation if by so doing he could have saved his Israelite brethren. Compare Moses' plea in Exodus 32:32.

anathema from Christ means “accursed (and therefore separated) from Christ” (AG, 54a; similarly GT, 37b). This N. T. usage derives from the use of *anathema* in the Septuagint as the translation of a Hebrew word meaning “a thing devoted to God without hope of being redeemed, and, if an animal, to be slain (Lev. 27:28, 29); therefore a person or thing doomed to destruction, Josh. 6:17; 7:12, etc.; a thing abominable and detestable, an accursed thing, Deut. 7:26” (GT).

The Tragedy of Israel Magnified by High Privilege (4–5)

Paul enumerates nine characteristics which mark Israel's privileged status:

who are Israelites—the honored name borne by them as descendants of Israel, through whom the messianic blessings for all the world were to come (cf. Gen. 28:13f; 32:28; 35:10ff).

whose is the adoption—the relationship with God, according to which he called Israel his son (Ex. 4:22f; Hos. 11:1; cf. Deut. 14:1f; Is. 1:2; 43:6).

and the glory refers to the way God's presence was manifested among them (Ex. 40:34f; 1 Kings 8:10f; 2 Chron. 7:1–3).

and the covenants. Plural as in Eph. 2:12, “the covenants of the promise,” likely referring to the oft repeated covenant of promise first made with Abraham (Gal. 3:15–18; cf. Gen. 12:1–3; 22:15–18), then repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:2–5) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15). The covenant at mount Sinai (Deut. 4:13) is included in what follows:

and the giving of the law. The legislation from mount Sinai. Cf. Moses' question: What nation had a law so righteous? (Deut. 4:8).

and the service. Grk *latreia*, “in the Greek Bible, *the service or worship of God according to the requirements of the levitical law*”: Ex. 12:25f, etc.; Heb. 9:1, 6 (GT, 372b); connected with the tabernacle and later with the temple.

and the promises including those made to Abraham (Gen. 12:13; 22:15–18), Isaac (Gen. 26:25) and Jacob (Gen. 28:12–15). But since these are included in “the covenants” above, “the promises” are to be distinguished as including also all the messianic promises of the Old Testament (cf. Rom. 1:2).

whose are the fathers—the fathers of the nation: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

and of whom is Christ as concerning the flesh. The Christ or Messiah; the climax of all the divine honors heaped on Israel—its greatness being magnified by the description of the Christ which follows.

VINDICATION OF GOD: GOD NOT AT FAULT ROMANS 9:6–29

Israel's Lost State Not a Failure of God's Word to Israel (9:6–13)

The exclusion of so many Jews from the blessings God promised (in the Old Testament, with special reference to the promises to Abraham) does not mean God made promises to Israel which he has failed to fulfill. This assertion (of 6a) is supported by the rest of the passage. See notes below.

Proposition Asserted (6a)

But it is not as though the word of God has come to nought—literally, fallen from or out of (Grk *ekpipto*); i. e., fallen from its position or fallen to the ground, as opposed to standing or remaining (11).

The Explanation That Justifies This Assertion (6b–7)

For they are not all Israel, that are of Israel—i. e., not everyone that springs from the fleshly Israel belongs to that true Israel to whom the promises were given. God's promises of messianic blessing never contemplated the whole of the physical nation called Israel.

Neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children (7a)—i. e., the promised children who were to be heirs of the messianic blessings. The proof is found in Genesis 21:12: “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” Ishmael too was Abraham's seed (Gen. 21:13). But God made it plain that in Isaac, and not just any seed of Abraham, the seed of God's purpose would be realized.

Further Explanation (8–9)

Not just any seed of Abraham born in the ordinary fleshly way, but children born through the power of the divine promise would be “chil-

dren of God,” “reckoned for a seed”); as proved by the promise given in Genesis 18:10 with regard to the birth of Isaac.

Further Proof: The Second Generation (10–13)

Paul’s point is even more firmly established by the choice God made in the second generation. One might argue that the reason Ishmael was excluded is that his mother was a slave woman—not Abraham’s true wife. But in the second generation God made a choice between twin sons of the same mother, before they were born. God’s choice of Jacob over Esau when both were still in Rebecca’s womb, “neither having done anything good or bad,” insured that the divine purpose would not depend upon human works, but wholly on the sovereign will of the one who calls (the seed, 7).

This choice of Jacob over Esau was made known in Genesis 25:23, and agrees with the later statement found in Malachi 1:2f, where “loved” and “hated” are explained by the difference in the treatment accorded the descendants of Jacob and Esau. The context in each passage refers to the choice of nations for divine purpose—not of individuals to salvation.

Addendum: Application of the Passage

No one can object that the lostness of Israel is a failure of God’s promises. The promised blessings never from the beginning rested on a fleshly basis. It was always a matter of God’s choosing.

God Not Unrighteous (9:14–18)

The divine choices discussed in 6–13 (and the reasoning over these choices as applied to the present distinction between Israelites) require further explanation. They do not imply unrighteousness in God. Paul’s arguments here (based on two quotations from the Old Testament) do not prove the righteousness of God. But they show that God cannot be accused of unrighteousness in the present instance unless the accuser is also prepared to say God was unrighteous in the way he exercised his sovereign will in the cases of Moses and Pharaoh, since these involve the same issue.

Question Raised (14)

What conclusion should be reached from God's choice between fleshly descendants of Abraham? Are these choices a manifestation of unrighteousness in God? That conclusion is intolerable, of course, and Paul supports the rejection of it with two cases involving essentially the same behavior on God's part, wherein no Israelite (or believer) would accuse God of unrighteousness.

The Objects of God's Mercy Determined by God Alone (15–16)

In response to Moses' pleadings, Jehovah says: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, ..." (15, quoting Ex. 33:19), from which Paul concludes that the object of God's mercy is not determined by human will or effort. It is wholly determined by God, the one who shows the mercy (16).

So Also the Objects of Divine Hardening (17–18)

The argument is completed with a reference to Exodus 9:16. God had placed Pharaoh in his position for the purpose of demonstrating his power and thereby establishing his reputation throughout the earth. He executed this purpose by hardening Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12), which became the occasion for striking Egypt with a series of ten devastating blows. From this expression of divine sovereignty Paul concludes that just as it is wholly up to God to determine the persons on whom he shows mercy, so it is equally up to God to determine the persons whom he hardens (18).

Addendum: Application of this Passage

Be careful to draw from this passage only what is there. Some have pressed into it more than it says. It does not say to whom God actually extends mercy (cf. Prov. 28:13; Is. 55:7) or whom he actually hardens, but only that he himself will determine these matters. The passage does not say whether God acts arbitrarily, on the basis of undisclosed factors, or on the basis of differences of attitude in individu-

als. Draw out all that is in these verses, but then stop right there. Do not read anything into them.

Further Vindication of God’s Dealings (19–29)

Objection Anticipated (19)

If God hardens “whom he will,” why does he still find fault with these hardened ones, since his will has been executed in their hardening? If God does as he pleases, whether in the showing of mercy or in hardening, on what ground can the object of these actions be either praised or blamed for what God himself has done? The person would seem to be passive, not responsible, and therefore, neither worthy of praise on the one hand nor deserving of blame on the other.

Paul does not directly answer this question, at least not with an explanation of the problem or refutation of the argument. He does make two responses:

First Response: Right of the Potter Over the Clay (20–21)

Paul rebukes the objector for challenging God. God is like a potter who has the right to do as he pleases with the clay. The thing formed by him has no right to challenge him. Basically, then, Paul’s reply is that man must remember who he is, and who God is. Cf. Isaiah 45:9.

that replies against God. Grk *antapokrinomai* is to answer back or against; “answer in turn,” here applied to “one who answers back to God” (AG, 73a).

a vessel unto honor “i. e. for honorable use” (GT, *skeuos*, 577b); “a vessel for honor = to be honored”—“a vessel that is honored by the use to which it is put” (AG, *time*, 817b).

Examples: Fine China used only for special guests or occasions; the fine container used for expensive perfume; that used for expensive jewelry; Paul himself as “a chosen vessel” to bear the name of Christ (Acts 9:15).

another unto dishonor “i. e. for a low use (as, a urinal)” (GT).

Addendum: Caution Re. Application

Again we must be careful to draw from these verses only what is there. They speak only of God’s “right” and say nothing of how he actually exercises his “right.” They do not address the issues of human responsibility and free will. See Jeremiah 18:1–12 & Second Timothy 2:20f for passages which do speak to these issues, even using the same figure of the potter and the clay. Keep in mind that the Romans passage is making only one point. It does not deal with all related issues. Bearing this in mind we must avoid trying to press into the passage ideas which are not there.

Second Response: The Actual Use of God’s Power (22–24)

Paul has shown that such a question as raised in 19 is inappropriate, for the Creator has the right to do as he pleases and must not be contradicted by his creatures (20–21). But now he brings in the way God has actually used his power. When the actual working of God is considered, all ground for criticism is totally swept away.

What if God (22) is literally: *But if God ...* The construction is incomplete. The conclusion is clearly implied, though not directly stated. It is comparable to the frequent usage in English: What if I do ‘thus and so’?, implying: What would you do then? or: What would you say to that?

Paul has argued that it is totally inappropriate for the creature to challenge his Creator in the manner of 19. Now he continues: *But if God endured ... etc.* (22–24), implying: What becomes of such an objection as raised in 19 in that case? Will it not be utterly swept away? Will not any such feelings of injustice in God disappear altogether?

And this “What if ...” or “But if ...” clause embodies the way God has actually used his right as Creator.

willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known (22). How could the holy God not have been willing to do so, since he was dealing with “vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction”? Observe the reference of this language back to 17. God was dealing with persons like Pharaoh.

Instead of immediately showing his wrath, however, he “endured with much longsuffering ...” The contrast between God’s steady will-

ing and his enduring with longsuffering would seem to demand the relationship between the clauses indicated in ASV margin: “although willing ... he endured ...”

endured with much longsuffering (22) i. e., instead of going right on ahead and showing his wrath and his power, as he had every right to do.

vessels of wrath (22). Further characterized as “fitted for destruction,” for which reason the meaning must be: vessels “into which wrath is emptied” (GT, 577b); vessels suited to be containers of wrath, or to have wrath poured into them. In this context Paul surely refers to Israel in its obstinate rebellion against God.

fitted unto destruction (22) or for destruction. The clause does not say who fitted them for destruction. God prepared the “vessels of mercy ... for glory” (23). But surely God is not to be thought of as the one who fitted the vessels of wrath for destruction. It makes no sense to say God “endured with much longsuffering” vessels which he himself had “fitted for destruction” (cf. Whiteside).

and that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy (23) is a purpose clause and seems to be connected with “endured, etc.” (22). It defines the purpose for which God “endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted for destruction”—in effect, the reason Israel had been spared in spite of its sinfulness. Remember that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22), as Paul has pointed out in this very chapter (5). God’s intention was to make the riches of his glory known to all the world through the Jews. But he could not have fulfilled this plan had he shown his wrath and manifested his power in their complete destruction.

It is clear that the actual working and purpose of God in history takes the ground from every such objection as the one raised in 19.

vessels of mercy (23) i. e., “fitted to receive mercy,—explained by the words ‘which he afore prepared for glory’” (GT, 577b).

which he afore prepared unto glory (23). Grk *proetoimazo* refers to advance preparation: “prepare beforehand” (AG, 705b); “to prepare before, to make ready beforehand” (GT, 539a). The vessels of wrath were “fitted for destruction” (22). God himself prepared the vessels of

mercy in advance for glory. Some explain this advance preparation in terms of the purpose of God in eternity (cf. 8:29f). But Paul is not thinking of God’s elect in some abstract sense, but of the church in a concrete sense as those actually now called (24). Perhaps this preparation is best explained generally as all that was done in advance of that call to prepare them to be recipients of glory.

us, whom he also called, etc. (24)—concrete definition of the vessels of mercy referred to in 23.

Inclusion of Gentiles (24) in Accord with Old Testament Prophecy (25–26)

Paul quotes Hosea 1:10 & 2:23. The original application was to Israelites as having been disowned by Jehovah (9). But since that rejection put them in the position of Gentiles in relation to Jehovah—in fact, one might say, made them Gentiles—the prophecy has as much and as exact application to Gentiles who had never been God’s people as to Israelites who had been rejected after once being God’s people.

The Exclusion of the Greater Part of Israel Also in Accord with Old Testament Prophecy (27–29)

Isaiah in two different places (1:9 & 10:22f) had predicted that only a very small remnant from Israel would survive the judgments of God. Readers of the Old Testament should not have been surprised if only a small remnant of Israel was saved.

for the Lord will execute his word upon the earth (28) refers to Isaiah’s prophecies of Israel’s destruction.

finishing it i. e., bringing it to its end or fulfilling it (Grk *sunteleo*).

and cutting it short perhaps meaning something like: making short work of it. Grk *suntemno* means to cut short; but the exact application is uncertain. VED may be best: “*suntemno* signifies to contract by cutting, to cut short; thus, to bring to an end speedily” (on “cut,” No. 7). “The cutting short of His word is suggestive of the summary and decisive character of the Divine act” (on “short,” No. 3).

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as Sodom ... like unto Gomorrah (29) Isaiah 1:9, alluding to the complete devastation of these cities (Gen. 19). Except for a very small remnant, Israel would have been wiped out entirely.