

What About Israel? (Part I)

Text: Romans 9:1-29

Series: Romans [#12]

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Theme: **Sovereign God Is Righteous Despite Israel's Rejection Of Christ.**

Introduction

Chapter 9 opens a new section in the book of Romans. Paul has been teaching the basics of the gospel, the good news of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This message raised a number of questions, particularly questions and issues about the Jewish people and Israel. Some had misunderstood, and others misrepresented Paul's teaching and its implications for the Israel.

Being misunderstood and misrepresented was, and is nothing new. Once I asked a representative of a Christian organization why they had tight restrictions on their printed material. He told me that people might not understand and misrepresent our positions if they did not hear them at a conference before getting the printed material. I told him, "Welcome to the real world! Anyone who speaks or writes faces not only the risk, but the reality of being misunderstood and misrepresented. If you are not willing to deal with that, the answer is simple: Don't speak. Don't write."

There were many questions, misunderstandings and misrepresentations about the gospel with respect to Israel and the Law. So Paul, in chapters 9-11, deals with the question "*What About Israel?*" While these questions center on Israel, their deepest concerns have to do with what God is like and what He is doing, particularly with respect to His sovereignty and righteousness. In chapter 9 Paul deals with the overwhelming majority of Israel rejecting Christ and how that fits into God being unchanging, faithful and righteous. Paul's main point is that *Sovereign God is righteous despite Israel's rejection of Christ.*

Paul's Concern For Israel And Israel's Privileges.

He begins with sharing His heart for his own people. He Paul opens this section personally, emphatically and passionately. Verse 1. "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit." Positively, he affirms he is telling the truth because he is speaking the truth he received from Christ out of his relationship with Christ. Negatively, he affirms he is not lying nor misguided because he is relying on the Holy Spirit to guide his conscience.

Why was Paul so direct and dramatic? Throughout the first eight chapters he has said that all Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God; that only true faith by God's grace in Christ saves, not keeping the Law; that Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing before God and with each other in the church. Both Jewish and Gentile believers could have some hard questions by now and, in light of what he was about to write, there would be even more. So Paul

forcefully declares that what he is writing is not his own speculation, nor a negative reaction to Judaism and the Jewish people. It is God's truth.

Then he describes his great love for his own people. Look at verse 2.

“I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” (2-3)

We know that most of the Jews did not gladly welcome Christ as their Messiah, but vehemently rejected Him. As this rejection continued day after day, and now year after year, it brought continual, deep sorrow to Paul. The sorrow was so deep he could have wished the impossible—that he who had been forever saved by God's grace, would be cursed by God, separated from God forever, so his own people would believe.

It is reminiscent of Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the Law, seeing the great sin of the people, asking God to forgive them and, if not, he told God he wanted to perish with them, to be blotted out of God's book of life (Exodus 32:15-32). Yes, this section is a very personal message which Paul states emphatically and passionately.

Israel's rejection of Christ was tragic to Paul, especially in light of the unique blessings, the great privileges God had given them. He gives a brief, but yet expansive summary of those privileges in verses 4-5. As a nation

- they had the privilege of being Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God's own people.
- The nation had the privilege of being adopted as God's own sons by His gracious choice.
- The nation also had “the glory.” Paul most likely is referring to the privilege of God's presence with Israel through their history, such as the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire being with them on their wilderness journey. But he also may be thinking of God's promises of future glory.
- He goes on. They had the covenants that God made with them through Abraham, Moses, and David.
- It was to them that God gave the Law, His holy, righteous and good Law.
- They had a unique and holy privilege of serving God.
- The nation had all those promises God had made to them. Peter tells us that God has given us who are in Christ “precious and magnificent promises.” Israel also received many “precious and magnificent promises” (2 Peter 1:4).

- Their's too were “the fathers,” Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through whom they not only came, but through whom they had the promises and national relationship with God.
- And finally, and the greatest, “from whom is the Christ,” the Messiah, Jesus Christ the Savior of the world came through Israel.

Yes, Israel had many great and unique privileges. As God said to them through the prophet Amos, “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth” (3:12).

This statement of Paul's great love for his own people and affirmation of Israel's great privileges sets the stage for the difficult questions and issues Paul will now address. We will follow Paul's order, beginning with the questions and issues around ...

God's Promises To Israel And Israel's Rejection Of Christ.

Israel's rejection of Christ in light of God's promises presented a problem to many Jews. “So now,” some would ask, “what about all these great privileges God gave to our nation? What about His word to us? After all, God told Abraham, Moses and Joshua that the land He was giving them would be theirs *forever*. God said He would establish David's kingdom *forever*. God said the Messiah would rule on David's throne *forever*. But now Paul is teaching that God justifies Jews and Gentiles alike without a connection to the nation of Israel and the Law. And most of our people are rejecting Christ, are not being saved. So,

- ‘What about Israel?’
- ‘What's happened to God's word to them?’
- ‘Did God change His mind?’
- ‘Has His word to Israel failed? Is it like a withered flower, dead and fallen on the ground?’
- ‘If so, how can God truly be righteous?’”

There are important implications here for all who have put their faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike. If God changed His mind, or if His word to Israel changed for whatever reason, how can we be certain that what He has said to us about salvation in Christ will not change or fail someday? And so Paul gets to the problem at the start of verse 6 by writing, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed.”

He moves immediately to the answer. Paul answers by pointing out and correcting a common misconception among Jews. That misconception was that being a Jew automatically made you one of God's children. To those who believed that, every Israelite would be saved. Being born as one of Abraham's descendants never guaranteed being an Israelite nor being saved. So Paul wrote in verse 6, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants” (6b-7a).

Having said this, Paul gives two clear and powerful illustrations to make the point. The first illustration is Abraham's son Isaac, in verses 7-9. You may recall the story. Abraham and Sarah decided to fulfill God's promise that they would have a son on their own by him having a child with her servant. So Ishmael was born. But God's *word of promise* was that even though Sarah was beyond the age of having children, she would have a son. A year later Isaac, the son of God's promise, Isaac, was born.

After Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah, and they had six sons. None of those seven half-brothers of Isaac were children of God's promise. Only Isaac was. Only he received God's promises and blessings for the nation that came from Abraham. In the historical, national sense, Paul reminds his people that not all of Abraham's children were Israelites. They trace their roots back to Abraham and Isaac, not Abraham and Ishmael.

The second illustration is Isaac's twin sons Jacob and Esau, in verses 10-13. These boys, obviously, had the same father and mother, unlike Isaac and Ishmael. So they give even more support to Paul's point. One might expect Israel would trace its roots through both of them or, if not both, through Esau who was older than Jacob, even though only slightly. But God decided otherwise. He chose Jacob before he was born, as recorded in Genesis 25:23 and noted here by Paul. This was God's sovereign choice. It was not based on anything Jacob and Esau had done—for they were not born yet—or on anything they would do after they were born. It had nothing to do with what they did or their behavior.

Again, in the historical and national sense, Paul reminds people that not all of Abraham's children were Israelites. They trace their roots back through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not Abraham, Isaac and Esau. While Paul is discussing Israel as a nation, his underlying point, as seen in his opening expression of sorrow about his people not coming to Christ, is about the spiritual Israel. Paul knew, as he states later in chapter 11 (5), that there was only a remnant, a small group of Israel, who were being saved, even as it is today. The spiritual Israel, the people of God, is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul refers to all believers as "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. Being a child of God is based on God's sovereign, gracious choice. It never has been on the basis of ethnic heritage. As one writer puts it, "what counts is grace, not race."¹

So God's promises to Israel have been and are consistent and true. And God still has plans and purposes He will work out for Israel, as we will see later. His word to them has not failed. God is faithful to His word even though Israel by and large rejected Christ.

This leads us on to the second area of question and concern...

God's Choice Of People And His Justice.

The problem is that some people think,

"Wait a minute! If God chooses who He saves by His own will and grace alone, how can that be fair? How can it be just? God might have chosen some people who are *much worse* than some

He didn't choose. And, even if that's not the case, how can it be fair for God to arbitrarily choose some and not choose others?"

Knowing this, Paul wrote in verse 14, "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?" This question is still asked by and troubles many people today.

Paul's immediate answer is "May it never be!" "Never, ever is God, never ever can God be unjust!" His answer is not gently finessed. He immediately goes to the bottom line. He does this in two ways: First, he goes to Scripture. Second, he presents the Scripture's truths as they are, without trying to defend them or God.

It is good to explore the questions we have about God and what He does. But at some point we need to accept what God declares in His word, even when we cannot understand some of those truths as fully as we would like.

The Bible repeatedly declares that God is just and always acts justly. God said through Jeremiah that a wise person will boast not in himself but in that

"he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things." (9:23-24)

But let's look at Paul's argument from Scripture, not mine. Paul's two references go back to Moses. Verse 15. "For He [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" The setting, again, was after Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and found the people sinning in the gold calf debacle. Moses interceded for the people. God judged them, but with mercy. This was heart-wrenching for Moses. God reassured him and told him that He would "make all [His] goodness pass before [Moses]", that is, in a visible way. Then God said, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:19, 20). This was true not only at that time for Moses and Israel, but it is an eternal, unchanging part of God's character—He is sovereign, and He also is both gracious and merciful.

The second reference in verse 17 takes us back before Mt. Sinai to when Israel was still in Egypt.

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'"

God is sovereign and just. Part of Pharaoh's purpose in God's plan was to be a vehicle of displaying God's power in a way that people all around the earth would be able to see. God accomplished this even as Pharaoh stubbornly refused to acknowledge and obey Him. All around the world today people can read Exodus and see God's power displayed over earth's most powerful ruler of that time.

Now let's look at Paul's conclusion from these verses. In verse 16 he tells us "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." God's call, His choice, His election does not hinge on a person making a solid determination and then exerting all his or her effort and strength but rather, in God's sovereign grace. Remember, Paul has already demonstrated that all of people's efforts to reach and please God on their own end with a guilty verdict and condemnation. If salvation was dependant on our will and work, we would have no hope. Salvation comes by God's will and work, by His sovereign grace as a free gift.

Then Paul summarizes or concludes this point with verse 18. "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." We might accept God having mercy on whomever He wishes without great difficulty, but accepting God hardening whomever He wishes is more difficult. It's similar to accepting with relatively little difficulty that God in His sovereignty blesses people, but having more difficulty accepting that God in His sovereignty judges people. God sovereignly chooses both to have mercy on whom He desires and to harden whom He desires. The structure of the statement tells us that what is true of mercy is also true of hardening.

So, God hardens whomever He chooses. But remember, every person enters this world with a self-centered, rebellious, sinful nature and displays that in thought and action. Spiritual hardening makes a person insensitive to God and His truth, and without God's intervention it will only get worse. God hardens sinful people's hearts and they harden their own hearts, as we see in clearly and repeatedly in Pharaoh.

This discussion of God's choice of people and His justice vaults us into the last question or problem which is based in ...

God's Choice Of People And People's Responsibility.

Paul anticipates and states the next logical question in verse 19. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" Or, "So then, God chooses those on whom He will have mercy, those He will save. How then can He find fault with, how can He righteously condemn those He doesn't choose to everlasting life?"

Paul's answer in verse 20 might surprise you.

"On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?" (20-21)

Again, there is no fine-feathered finesse here. Paul could have started with a logical, progressive argument, but he goes directly to the bottom line. Paul says that as God's creatures we have no right to "answer back" or, "talk back" to God.

- God is the sovereign Ruler and Creator.

- God is just and righteous.
- God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-wise.
- How can His creatures question Him?
- How can a pot question the potter who made it?

Be clear on this—God accepts our sincere questions as we try to understand Him, His truth, ourselves and our relationship with Him. But He does not accept challenges from His creatures. Do you recall how God put Job, the man of unswerving faith, in his place when he challenged Him? God said to him,

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you
instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the
earth?” (Job 38:2-4)

And that was just the beginning. God’s reprimand of Job takes all of chapters 38 and 39 in the book of Job.

God is not a big bully trying to beat us into submission. He is eternal God who demands the respect due Him. God is the holy sovereign who chooses not only to demonstrate His wrath on sin, but also endure with much patience, even vessels who are prepared or who prepare themselves for destruction, as we read in verse 23.

Mercy is central in Paul’s thinking here. He uses the word mercy 21 times in his letters. Nine times in Romans. Four times here in chapter 9 alone. In His mercy God calls those who were not His loved people to be His loved people, we read in verse 25. God’s mercy. Paul quotes Isaiah, “Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah” (29).

God chose, predestined, called some out of sin and death into holiness and life. Every person has the responsibility to respond to the truth of God they have. Those who believe in Jesus Christ will have eternal life (John 3:16). “Whoever does not believe”, Jesus said, “will be condemned” (Mark 16:16, ESV).

God’s sovereignty and our ability and responsibility to believe work together perfectly. The problem for us is that we can not see that perfect mesh, only God can. When we try to force a full understanding of this with our limited abilities we will err. Not might err. Nor probably err. We *will* err. We are best to describe and understand what we can from Scripture and accept by faith what we cannot understand. One man writes,

“I will admit without shame that this section of Paul’s letter to the Romans contains mysteries I have no ability to unravel. Like the enigma of God’s nature, I accept that [*sic*] God’s sovereign plan as Scripture and then I faithfully teach it as the Holy Spirit enables me.”²

Conclusion.

*What about Israel? What about their rejection of Christ? What does that mean for them? What does it say about God? In this section Paul lets us know that *sovereign God is righteous despite Israel's rejection of Christ.**

What does this mean for us? One basic thing to remember is that salvation is and always has been by God's grace through faith. Just as it never has been based on being a physical descendant of Abraham, so it is not based on coming from a long line of Christians, attending church regularly, participating in, going through the observances of the church. The only certainty of sins forgiven and life with God, the only real hope for being with God forever is through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Make sure that is your hope.

The only hope for all the people around us who do not know Christ is to hear the gospel and receive Christ by faith. Yes, God has chosen all of His own before the foundation of the world. But he didn't publish a list of who they are. So, as the famous preacher English preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said 135 years ago,

“Our Savior has bid us preach the Gospel to every creature. He has not said, ‘Preach it only to the elect.’ And though that might seem to be the most logical thing for us to do, yet, since He has not been pleased to stamp the elect on their foreheads, or to put any distinctive mark upon them, it would be an impossible task for us to perform! Therefore when we preach the Gospel to every creature, the Gospel makes its own division and Christ's sheep hear His voice and follow Him.”³

As you reflect on these truths as we spend some time personally with God now, thank Him for His grace and mercy to you. Thank Him that your salvation is His work, a gift of His grace that does not depend on what you can or might do. Thank Him that even with all the things you don't understand, He is faithful and righteous. Thank Him for the opportunity you have to tell others about Christ, and that Christ will do the work of leading His sheep to place their trust in Him.

¹ N. T. Wright. *Climax Of The Covenant*. New York: T & T Clark International, 2004, p. 238.

² Charles R. Swindoll. *Insights On Romans*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, p. 185.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon. “Too Little For The Lamb” [Sermon #2937]. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1875, p. 6. <<http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols49-51/chs2937.pdf>>. Accessed 20 January 2010.

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