

# Romans: Chapter Nine

## **Romans 9.1-11.36: SOVEREIGNTY (Righteousness Rejected)**

Romans 9-11 is *dispensational* rather than *doctrinal* in character. The key theme is God's sovereign, righteous and faithful dealings with the nation of Israel (x14 in these chapters). Romans **9** = Israel's *past* (Rejection). Romans **10** = Israel's *present* (Responsibility). Romans **11** = Israel's *prospects* (Restoration). The chapters are not in parenthesis but form an integral part of the argument of the epistle. For example:

- Paul is affirming the faithfulness and righteousness of God. What would happen to God's promises to Israel? They had crucified their Messiah, the One in whom all the promises would be fulfilled, and rejected the gospel. Has God's word failed? Have His purposes been defeated? Has God been unrighteous in promising what could not be fulfilled? God forbid! God is not only righteous in justifying the guilty sinner, but equally righteous in His dealings with Israel.
- Gentile-Jew relations between Christians in Rome were fragile. Gentiles were proud in their attitude towards Jews (11.17-22). The teaching of Romans 9-11 was thus relevant to both groups that they might further appreciate God's greater purpose for Jew and Gentile.
- Paul has just given a clear statement of eternal security which presupposes a faithful God (8.31-39). If God has reneged on His promises to Israel, why not Christians? The objection must be answered because if God has been unrighteous in *history*, we are fools to trust Him for *eternity*.

It is critical to recognise that **Romans 9** is dealing with *two* main, related issues:

- Does the rejection of the gospel by Israel, and thus being 'accursed', cancel God's promises to them as a nation? This is dealt with primarily in vv.1-13.
- The Jews' objection to the apparent sovereign choice of God to introduce Gentiles into the blessing of salvation on the same ground as the Jew – justification by faith through grace, not works. This is considered in vv.14-33.

### The Privileges of the Nation of Israel (9.1-5)

**v.1:** Paul's very strong language in the opening verses suggests he is responding to a charge from the Jews. Perhaps, as an apostle to the Gentiles, his loyalty to Israel was under suspicion, as was his preaching which appeared to undermine the law and its promises to Israel. **v.2:** Paul declares his great grief (heaviness) and uninterrupted anguish (sorrow) at the present state of his countrymen having rejected the gospel. **v.3:** In fact, his love was so great for Israel, that were it possible, he desired to be 'accursed' or separated from Christ in their stead that they might be reconciled. This is similar to the request of Moses (Exodus 32), but goes beyond as Paul is speaking of more than mere physical death. Here is a faint shadow of the love of Christ who was made a curse for us. Paul is thus implying that the majority of the nation stood without God's salvation and under His judgment having rejected Christ.

**v.4:** These two verses provide a partial explanation for the magnitude of Paul's distress. The nation of Israel occupied a unique place of privilege in the purposes of God (Deuteronomy 4.7). This made their present unbelief so painful and perplexing. First and foremost, they were **Israelites** (God's princes) – a title of dignity and privilege denoting their unique relationship with God (Genesis 32.28). The privileges are divided into *three* sections by the Greek pronoun *hon* (whom, whose). The first group contains: **adoption** (Israel was God's national, firstborn son; Exodus 4.22; Hosea 11.1); **glory** (visible symbol of divine presence; Exodus 40.34; 1 Kings 8.10-11); **covenants** (*diatheke*, mostly signifies an obligation undertaken by a single person, thus the unconditional Abrahamic, Davidic and New covenants); giving of the **law** (Mosaic covenant, Exodus 19-20; Acts 7.53); **service** of God (religious worship or ritual connected with the tabernacle and temple, cf. Hebrews 9.1); and the **promises** (particularly those made to Abraham from which flowed all subsequent promises, Genesis 12.1-3). **v.5:** The final privileges stand alone as unique. 'Whose are the **fathers**', referring to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs with whom the original covenant and promises were made. It is *from* them, in terms of human ancestry, that **Christ** came. This is the crowning privilege of the nation. This same One is 'over all' in His supremacy. He is not merely a Man, but **God**, worthy of eternal praise and worship. Note. Some translations seek to remove the clear reference to the deity of Christ by punctuating the verse differently and making the eulogy to refer to God, not Christ. This is wrong. **WE Vine** shows that the AV reading would be 'unhesitatingly adopted by Greek scholars, apart from questions of doctrine'.

### Is God Unreliable? (9.6-13)

**v.6:** Had God's word to Israel 'taken none effect' (to *fail* or *go off course* like a ship)? **No!** Despite Israel's unbelief His promises to them would be faithfully fulfilled, but not in the nation as a whole, rather in the godly remnant. Inside the larger circle of all the *physical* Israelites, there was a smaller circle of true *spiritual* Israelites (cf. 2.28-29). There is an Israel within Israel. Nathanael was an 'Israelite indeed', one who had accepted the Messiah and thus belonged to the

inner circle. Being a physical descendant did not, then, guarantee the covenant blessings as the following verses will show. **vv.7-9:** For example, Ishmael was a natural, physical descendant of Abraham, but the covenant promises were advanced through Isaac as the child of promise, not Ishmael. This was God's sovereign choice.

**vv.10-11:** The covenant promises were not a matter of *descent* (Ishmael and Isaac), and neither were they a matter of *deeds* (Esau and Jacob). Before these twins had even been born and done any 'good or evil', Jacob was chosen by God to be the recipient of covenant blessing. This is His 'purpose according to election' – a choice concerning the roles these individuals would play in the unfolding purpose of God. **v.12:** This choice was evident in the word God spoke to Rebekah before they were born. God chose that the elder should serve the younger, a reversal of natural order (Genesis 25.23). Given that Scripture does not record Esau serving Jacob, the prophecy probably refers to the nations that sprang from them (cf. 1 Samuel 14.47; 2 Samuel 8.14; 1 Kings 11.15-16). **v.13:** Paul further appeals to Malachi 1.2 to support his case. In Malachi, the Jews were questioning God's love toward them. However, God's love had been clearly demonstrated for Israel (Jacob) in that God chose the nation to be a special people unto himself, rather than Edom (Esau), cf. Deuteronomy 7.6-7. Instead Edom was 'hated' or *disfavoured* and *disregarded* in preference to Israel in terms of such covenant blessings. 'Hatred' is a Hebrew idiom for preference. The context of Malachi suggests the same. God had restored Israel after the captivity because He had a purpose for them in history – to bring in the Messiah. The desolation of Edom (Malachi 1.3-4) was proof that they had not been chosen for such privilege. 'Hatred' also suggests *wrath* and *indignation* (cf. Malachi 1.4) which Edom brought upon themselves through their wicked treatment of Israel and legacy of unbelief (Psalm 137.7; Jeremiah 49.7-22; Obadiah). *A woman once said to Spurgeon, 'I cannot understand why God should say that He hated Esau.'* *'That,' Spurgeon replied, 'is not my difficulty, madam. My trouble is to understand how God could love Jacob!'* We must not miss the implicit spiritual lessons. God has made a selection within national Israel (v.6), just as He selected Isaac (not Ishmael) and Jacob (not Esau). This selection is not based on *natural* birth or *works*, but *spiritual* birth and **faith!**

#### Is God Unrighteous? (9.14-18)

**v.14:** Is God unrighteous in choosing Isaac and Jacob? God forbid! Likewise, God is not unrighteous in choosing to save Gentiles on the same ground as Jews. **v.15:** God is sovereign and merely acting in accordance with Divine character and purpose – which can only be righteous. Israel deserved to be destroyed for idolatry when the law was given at Sinai, yet God showed them mercy and compassion (Exodus 32-33). Why then complain of Divine mercy towards the Gentiles today? **v.16:** So, God's choice did not depend on man's *will* (Ishmael and Isaac) or *work* (Esau and Jacob), but His sovereign mercy. **v.17:** The same God that chose to show mercy and compassion to Israel at Sinai, also chose to harden Pharaoh during their Egyptian bondage. Of course, God first acted in mercy to remove the plagues, but this only became the occasion of Pharaoh hardening (insensitivity to God and His word) his own heart. Consequently, God judicially hardened his already self-hardened heart<sup>1</sup>. Pharaoh, even though he opposed God, was 'raised up' to a position of prominence and power, and maintained there by God in order that he might fulfil Divine purpose. God chose to preserve Pharaoh alive throughout the whole process that divine power and glory might be known throughout the earth (Exodus 15.14-16; Joshua 2.10; 9.9; 1 Samuel 4.8). **v.18:** The principle is clear. God is free to show mercy when it is *undeserved*. He is just as free to condemn or 'harden' when it is *deserved*. The application is also clear. There was no complaint on the part of Israel in the divine hardening of Pharaoh, so why complain when God judicially hardens and blinds Israel for their rejection of the gospel today (11.7, 25; 2 Corinthians 3.14)? God has chosen to show mercy on the Gentiles for they have accepted the gospel. Likewise, He has hardened the Jews for they have rejected the gospel.

#### Is God Unreasonable? (9.19-24)

**v.19:** If God has sovereignly chosen to show *mercy* to the Gentiles and *harden* the Jews, why does He then hold individuals responsible for rejecting the gospel? Who, after all, can reject God's sovereign will (*boulema*)? The simple answer is God's sovereignty cannot cancel man's responsibility! The Jewish nation refused to believe in their own Messiah, therefore God judicially blinded them (cf. vv.30-33). But before Paul responds to the question, he rebukes the *spirit* of the question, i.e. the pride of man. **v.20:** Who are we, as mere creatures, to quarrel with (or *challenge*) the Creator? It is not acceptable for Jews to *contend* with God over their judicial blindness ('made me thus'). **v.21:** Paul introduces the illustration of the potter and the clay as a way of establishing the Creator's right over the creature. The clay may illustrate Israel, out of which 'lump' God has made one vessel to *honour* (the true, spiritual Israel) and one to *dishonour* (the unbelieving, physical Israel), cf. Jeremiah 18.1-12. 'Honour' has the thought of value, price and worth,

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<sup>1</sup> **Edersheim:** *Twice ten times in the course of this history does the expression hardening occur in connection with Pharaoh. Although in our English version only the word 'harden' is used, in the Hebrew original three different terms are employed, of which one (as in Exodus 7:3) literally means to make hard or insensible; the other (as in Exodus 10:1) to make heavy, that is, unimpressionable; and the third (as in Exodus 14:4), to make firm or stiff, so as to be immovable. Now it is remarkable, that of the twenty passages which speak of Pharaoh's hardening, exactly ten ascribe it to Pharaoh himself, and ten to God, and that in both cases the same three terms are used. Thus, the making 'hard,' 'heavy,' and 'firm' of the heart is exactly as often and in precisely the same terms traced to the agency of Pharaoh himself as to that of God.*

and naturally denotes eternal life (2.7). 'Dishonour' means common, lacking in dignity, shameful. These words speak of the eternal destinies governed by personal choice. **v.22:** Even though many times God desired to pour out His wrath on an idolatrous and unbelieving nation, instead He has 'endured with longsuffering'. God has been patient and merciful to Israel in allowing them time to repent (Acts 2.38; 3.19-20; 2 Peter 3.9). Having rejected Christ, individuals within unbelieving Israel have become 'vessels of wrath' on the stage of human history (judicial blindness). These vessels are 'fitted' or 'ripe' for destruction (eternal ruin). The word could be either in the *middle* (they fitted themselves) or *passive* voice (fitted by God). It is probably a combination of both, i.e. the Jews, by sin and rebellion, have fitted themselves for wrath which God will execute consequent upon their own unbelief. **v.23:** But note the glorious contrast. There are some individuals within the nation that accepted Christ – such are vessels of *honour* and *mercy*. The riches of God's glory have been showered upon them now (Ephesians 3.16, 2 Corinthians 3.18) and will be fully realised in a coming day (cf. 8.18, 21, 30). Believers were appointed to this glory from eternity and rendered fit to receive it through conversion (cf. 8.29; Ephesians 2.10). **v.24:** The scope of the vessels of mercy is now widened to include 'us' – Jewish and Gentile believers of the present dispensation of grace.

### Is God Unpredictable? (9.25-29)

God's mercy in the calling of Gentiles *and* Jews in this present day of grace is no surprise – the OT confirms it. **First**, Paul paraphrases from Hosea 2.23 (**v.25**) and 1.10 (**v.26**) and applies it to the calling of the Gentiles. **Second**, he quotes from Isaiah 10.22-23 (**vv.27-28**) and 1.9 (**v.29**) to show that a remnant of the Jews would be saved. **vv.25-26:** The context of the quotations from Hosea concerns the restoration of Israel, but the apostle, under divine inspiration, applies them to the Gentiles. Those who were 'far off' and 'strangers' (Ephesians 2.13, 19) have now been brought nigh, even into the circle of God's favour (beloved) and declared to be His people (relationship). Both saved Jew and Gentile together in this day of grace are called 'sons of the living God'. Not only can God restore a people who had the name but disgraced it (Israel), He can also bring in a people that never had the name (Gentiles). **vv.27-29:** The OT not only declared the *inclusion* of the Gentiles, but also the *exclusion* of the Jews – only a remnant would be saved. The context of Isaiah 10 relates to the southern kingdom of Judah and their anticipated depletion through Assyria's invasion as the instrument of God's judgment. This judgment would be severe, but shortened or else they would have been wiped out as Sodom and Gomorrah (**v.29**). But, God had promised to preserve a remnant (seed). Likewise, God has preserved a remnant today – the Israel within Israel (v.6; 11.5).

### The **Pride** of the Nation of Israel (9.30-33)

In his conclusion to the ninth chapter, Paul explains why only a spiritual remnant of Israel has been saved in contrast to the abundance of Gentiles. **v.30:** 'What shall we say then?' is a phrase used seven times by Paul, generally to introduce an important matter or conclusion (cf. 4.1, 6.1, 7.7, 8.31). The obtaining of **righteousness** is the key theme (x13 up to 10.13) with two types being described: the righteousness that is by *faith* in contrast to the righteousness of the *law*; *God's* righteousness in contrast to the *self-righteousness* of the Jews. The conclusion is that Gentiles, in general, did not 'swiftly pursue' or 'follow after' holy living or a right standing before God. Yet, through the preaching of the gospel, they have 'attained' (won) the prize of righteousness on the principle of faith. This does not suggest self-effort, but is a simple consequence of receiving and believing the gospel. **v.31:** Israel is a contrast. They zealously pursued the law, seeking to establish their own righteousness by works. But they did not arrive at the goal. **FB Hole:** *They misused the law, treating it as a ladder by which they might climb into righteousness, instead of a plumb-line by which all their supposed righteousness might be tested.* **v.32:** Israel approached the law on the basis of works rather than faith. They should have recognised their inability to keep the law and thus cast themselves upon God's mercy (Luke 18.13). Consequently, they 'stumbled at the stone of stumbling', i.e. justification by faith. Paul quotes Isaiah 8.13-15 where the prophet foretells of an Assyrian invasion coming against Judah like an overwhelming flood. Yet God would prove Himself to be a 'sanctuary' for all those who put their trust in Him, a Rock on which they could stand secure (**FF Bruce**). In contrast, those who put their confidence in a human alliance with Assyria would be dashed against the same Stone. History was repeating itself in this day of grace. The Jews were not putting their faith in the Rock of God's providing (Christ, cf. 1 Peter 2.6-8) but trusting in themselves for eternal salvation. **v.33:** Adding Isaiah 28.16 to 8.14, Paul blends the OT texts. Christ is also a Rock of 'offence' (*skandalon* = to cause revulsion and opposition), no doubt referring to the cross (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.23; Galatians 5.11). But, those who believe 'upon Him' as a foundation shall not be 'ashamed' (disappointed or humiliated). Note. Isaiah 28.16 reads 'will not be in haste', suggesting no fear of impending judgment and the believer's firm confidence in the fulfilment of God's purposes.