

Paul on Israel

Introduction

Paul's Epistle to the Romans is the great doctrinal treatise of Christianity. In the letter, Paul dealt with the subjects of man's sin, justification, sanctification, glorification, and how we are to live in view of these truths. Paul covered these subjects in Romans 1-8 and 12-16. In the intervening chapters of 9-11 Paul took up a new subject: Israel. Paul addressed Israel's past (9), present (10), and future (11) in Romans 9-11 due to the Jews rejection of Jesus as their Messiah and King. Understanding Paul's argument concerning Israel is foundational to orthodox theology. The stakes are high: misreading Paul's argument completely distorts Biblical theology. Sadly, as early as the second century, Christendom began a systemic failure to recognize Paul's unique apostleship or understand his theology. As a consequence, much of what is taught concerning ecclesiology, eschatology, and Israelology throughout most of Christendom is wrong.

The ascended Lord saved and commissioned Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul, "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11.13; Ephesians 3.1; 1 Timothy 2.7). His commission was to proclaim the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24) to Gentiles (Romans 11.13). This commission was new and different from the commission Jesus had given the Twelve. Paul's commissioning occurred after it became clear that Israel would not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. While the nation had orchestrated his crucifixion, Israel had numerous opportunities to repent and accept him after his resurrection and ascension. The crisis point for the nation came at Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7.1-60). When the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen, it became clear that the nation would not repent. But according to God's prophetic program, the Gentiles were to be blessed *through Israel* (Isaiah 42.1; Zech. 8.23). The following two questions, therefore, come into

focus:

1. Since the Jews rejected the Messiah in his first advent and they were to serve as the channel of blessing to Gentiles, how could God bless the Gentiles? Jewish prophecy had no answer to this question. God's answer was His commissioning of Paul. Paul was the new apostle to fulfill that role.
2. But what of the Jews? What was their future? Did they have a future since they had rejected the Messiah? God's answer to this question was his revelation to Paul in Romans 9-11.

Examination of the Text

Romans 9.1-5

¹ *I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,* ² *that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.* ³ *For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,* ⁴ *who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises,* ⁵ *whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.*

From this passage we learn that the subject of Paul's discussion is his kinsmen according to the flesh, i.e., Jews, and that to them belonged God's blessings of the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the Law, the temple service, the promises, the fathers, and the Messiah. Paul was not talking about Gentiles or the Church. Gentiles had no part of God's covenantal dealings with Israel (cf. Ephesians 2.11-13) other than the general blessing under the Abrahamic covenant

(Genesis 12.3). Paul revealed his heartache and great distress over Israel's disobedience and wished, if possible, that he might be accursed and separated from Christ if Israel could be saved.

Romans 9.6-18

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; ⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." ⁸ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. ⁹ For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁰ And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

We have seen from the introductory verses that Paul's subject was the physical offspring of Jacob. He next introduced the question of whether God's plan had failed since Israel had failed. He declared: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." Paul's reasoning was in two parts. The first was "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." Paul recognized that there were two levels of being a Jew. The nation was in a covenant relationship with God and therefore blessings or cursings came upon all Jews. But beyond that, Paul understood the role faith played among individual Jews. There was more to being a Jew than just being a physical descendant of Abraham. To illustrate, he stated, "through Isaac your descendants will be named", "the older will serve the younger", and "Jacob have I loved, but Esau I hated". Isaac and Jacob exercised *faith*. Isaac was the child of promise ("Abraham believed in the Lord and he counted it unto him for righteousness," Genesis 15.6) and faith. God rejected the Abraham/Hager=Ishmael initiative for it represented works, not faith. In the case of Jacob, he exercised faith in that he revered the birthright that Esau despised.

The second part of Paul's reasoning was God's sovereignty. Paul illustrated this point by citing, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...", and "for this very purpose I raised you up" speaking of Pharaoh. Paul's conclusion: "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." His point was that since God was sovereign, His plan for Israel had not failed (could not fail) because the nation failed.

Romans 9.19-33

¹⁹ *You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"* ²⁰ *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?* ²¹ *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? ²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. ²⁵ As He says also in Hosea, "I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' And her who was not beloved, 'beloved.'" ²⁶ "And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'you are not My people,' There they shall be called sons of the living God." ²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; ²⁸ for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly." ²⁹ And just as Isaiah foretold, "Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah." ³⁰ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed."

Paul anticipated an objection to God's sovereignty: if God was sovereign and if his will was irresistible, how could God find fault? Paul's answer to this objection was essentially the same response as God's answer to Job. Despite the seeming unfairness of Job's suffering, after God had questioned him, Job replied,

⁵ *"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; ⁶ Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42.5-6).*

A word of caution is needed. Paul's phrase, "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" has *nothing* to do with individual predestination, particularly any teaching that God has predestined some to heaven and some to hell. Paul's subject was God's covenant people, Israel, and how He had dealt and will deal with them on the basis of covenantal promises. The phrase, "vessels of wrath" is σκεύη ὀργῆς. In the present context, the sense is vessels that merited wrath. His phrase κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν is best translated "were fitted for destruction. Paul's point was to demonstrate God's mercy. He did this by asking "what if" (εἰ δὲ in v. 22) God patiently tolerated vessels of wrath whose end was destruction. Each of us is without hope without God. God tolerated "vessels of wrath" to "make known" (γνωρίζω) "the riches of his glory upon the vessels of mercy which he prepared beforehand (προετοιμάζω) for glory." Paul argued that all deserved destruction but that God's glory was demonstrated on those who received mercy—both Jew and Gentile. He quoted Hosea and Isaiah to demonstrate God's mercy to Israel. Israel, whom God had called "not my people," (Hosea 1.9-10) will become "my people" and God will save a remnant out of Israel. We see Paul's argument beginning to congeal: God had revealed through the prophets that He had a future for national Israel. Paul then emphasized how God's mercy was realized—and how it was lost. To illustrate this he brought in the Gentiles. Gentiles pursued righteousness on the basis of works but took hold of God's mercy and obtained righteousness by faith—by believing Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). The Jews, however, stumbled because of self-righteous unbelief: they refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah.

Romans 10.1-11

¹ Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. ² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. ⁵ For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), ⁷ or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed."

Paul reiterated his deep desire for salvation for his kinsmen. He noted their zeal for God—a zeal with which Paul could identify wholeheartedly. He noted that this zeal was confused (as his had been) since it was directed by self-righteousness. Paul's point was to declare that true righteousness was based on faith. He emphasized God was near so that one does not have to strain to ascend to heaven or descend to the grave to find God. Salvation is attained by believing the gospel "confess Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)—not by works.

Romans 10.12-21

¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; ¹³ for "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" ¹⁶ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. ¹⁸ But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." ¹⁹ But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? First Moses says, "I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding will I anger you." ²⁰ And Isaiah is very bold and says, "I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me." ²¹ But as for Israel He says, "All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people."

In these verses, Paul stated one of the mysteries that the ascended, glorified Lord had revealed to him: the Church, the body of Christ. With the Lord's commission of Paul, and His revelation of the Church, the body of Christ, to Paul distinctions between Jew and Gentile were excluded in Christ (see [Paul's "Mystery"](#)). The word of salvation had gone forth to Israel in the past through Moses and Isaiah (quoted above) and now was going forth through Paul. Paul's gospel now

fulfills the prophecy.

Romans 11.1-11

¹ I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” ⁴ But what is the divine response to him? “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. ⁷ What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; ⁸ just as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, Eyes to see not and ears to hear not, Down to this very day.” ⁹ And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, And a stumbling block and a retribution to them.” ¹⁰ “Let their eyes be darkened to see not, And bend their backs forever.” ¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

Paul’s argued that there was always an Israel within Israel, a remnant, a “true” Israel. Thus, Paul stated, “for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Romans 9.6 cf. Isaiah 9.8). Paul then asked an essential question concerning

the Jews future in light of their history of unbelief and rejection of their Messiah, "God has not rejected his people, has he?" We must keep Paul's argument in mind. Who was the subject? His subject was national Israel. This Paul made clear, not only from the context, but from his declaration: "for I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul's answer to this question was the strongest negative he used: (μὴ γένοιτο, cf. Romans 9.14).¹ To ensure no one would misunderstand, Paul stated in verse 2, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew" (v. 2, cf. 1 Samuel 12.22; Psalm 94.14). This is as plain as language can be.

Paul knew his Bible and continued his argument by appealing constantly to the prophets. He cited Elijah, who had thought he was the only believer in all of Israel. God assured Elijah he was not alone—there were 7,000 others. God always had a believing remnant in Israel. For Elijah to think this reveals how dismal the spiritual climate was in Israel in his day. Considering that Israel's population was about 7 million, this meant that only 1 in 1,000 Jews were believers. The percentages have always been small (Matthew 7.13-14). Thus, Paul stated, "in the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a *remnant* according to God's gracious choice."

When Paul wrote of "God's gracious choice" he reaffirmed to his readers that grace eliminated works. Because Israel had "worked" to establish their righteousness, they had failed. What God required was faith—to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah (cf. Matthew 16.13-16; John 1.49, 11.26-27; Acts 8.35-37). Paul stated in verse 7 that Israel (the majority of Jews) had not obtained what it sought, i.e., the covenantal promises and blessings of God, but the "elect" (ἡ ἐκλογὴ), i.e., believing Israel (the remnant), obtained them. As for the rest of the nation, they were hardened (πρωρόω). This word means to harden or become callous or insensitive to

touch (cf. Mark 6.52; 8.17; John 12.40). In verse 8, Paul employed a combination quote (cf. Isaiah 29.10, 6.9), and stated that Israel was in a stupor. He went on to quote David (another combination quote, cf. Psalm 69.23; 34.8; 28:4) when he spoke words of judgment regarding God's enemies.

In light of all the above, one might be tempted to think that after all this failure, God would replace Israel with something better. Anticipating such a thought, Paul asked, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they?" What was Paul's answer? *Again*, he answered with his strongest negative—μὴ γένοιτο—No!!!! It is hard to understand how one can misunderstand these verses. Paul declared again and again that while Israel had failed, while only a remnant of the nation (those who apprehended God by faith) was approved of by God, that God was not through with the offspring of Jacob. The notion that God has "replaced" Israel with the Church is as false a teaching as denial of the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, or the bodily resurrection of Christ. Yet this false teaching has existed in Christendom since the early second century.²

What has been the result of Israel's hardening? Paul declared in verses 11-12:

¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

As a result of Israel's failure, God in his mercy brought salvation to Gentiles. According to God's program for Israel, which God had revealed through the prophets, Gentiles would be blessed through the success of Israel (Isaiah 42.1; Zechariah

8.20-23). According to the prophetic plan, the Messiah would be rejected, the tribulation would come, and the Lord would set up his kingdom on earth, ruling from Jerusalem (Psalm 2. 1-6). God had never revealed anything through the prophets about the Church, the Body of Christ. Nor did Jesus reveal anything about the Church during his earthly ministry. The body of Christ was a "secret" God held in his own mind until Paul. Instead of bringing in the prophesied tribulation, the "wrath of God," (Jeremiah 30.7), God saved the Apostle Paul to become "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11.13) and proclaim "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). The prophesied earthly kingdom (Zechariah 14.9) was delayed. God revealed to Paul a new plan in which He is building his Church, the Body of Christ. Thus, while Israel failed, God's purpose to bless the Gentiles was not thwarted. Mercy and grace came to Gentiles, not through Israel's success, but through Israel's failure. Furthermore, Paul stated that if such good came from Israel's failure, think of the glory that will come when they succeed, i.e., "how much more will their fulfillment be (v. 12)!" Thus, Paul wrote in verse 15, "for if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

Romans 11.16-32

Paul now began his great teaching of the olive tree:

¹⁶ *If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.* ¹⁷ *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,* ¹⁸ *do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.*

¹⁹ *You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."* ²⁰ *Quite right, they were broken off for*

their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? ²⁵ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob." ²⁷ "This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." ²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. ³² For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

Paul used the olive tree to represent God's blessing. The holy root began with God's dealings with Abraham. The Jews were the natural branches that grew from this root. Because of unbelief, God broke them off. After this, God

grafted believing Gentiles (primarily) onto the olive tree as “wild” branches. As a result, these “wild” branches now partake of the “rich root of the olive tree.” They partake of God’s blessing on the basis of faith—as the original receiver of blessings (Abraham) partook of them by faith (Romans 4.3). Paul issued a prescient warning to the “wild” branches (Gentiles) not to boast at the expense of the natural branches (Israel) because the branches—natural or wild—do not support the root. Rather, the root supports the branches. He continued, knowing what would be said: “branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” Paul acknowledged this was true but warned the “wild” branches that they stand by faith alone and if God did not spare the natural branches he surely would not spare “wild” branches.

Paul then went on to declare that the “natural” branches (Israel) would be regrafted into the olive tree. Thus in verses 23-24:

²³ *And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.*

²⁴ *For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?*

Paul’s statement, “if they do not continue in their unbelief” is a Greek 3rd class condition. The fulfillment is uncertain but likely. However, the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as what Paul stated in the passage, indicates the outcome is certain: the natural branches will be grafted in again. Paul had used the same 3rd class condition in the previous verse (v. 22), “if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off,” in writing about the Church, the Body of Christ. Thus, we find an equivalence of likelihood regarding both God’s promises to Israel and God’s promises to the

Church.

Paul then provided new information. The Old Testament had not revealed it, Jesus did not reveal it in His earthly ministry, and Peter and the other apostles knew nothing of it. Paul wrote in verses 25-26a:

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved;

Paul revealed a “secret” (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο). A [μυστήριον](#) is not something “strange” or “mysterious” but something hidden, a secret. The secret was that a “partial hardening has happened to Israel.” The hardening was partial, for some Jews did believe in Christ. The hardening was also temporary, as revealed by the word “until” (ἄχρι). Paul disclosed the rest of the secret when he revealed when the hardening would end. The answer was when the “fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” The “fullness of the Gentiles” was Paul’s phrase for completion of the Body of Christ, the Church (1 Corinthians 15.23, 52-53; 1 Thessalonians 4.14-17; 2 Thessalonians 1.1-6). When the Body of Christ is complete, God will remove it and deal again with his covenant people, Israel. God will return to the timeline he had revealed to David (Psalm 2.1-6) and the other prophets. God had delayed His wrath following the rejection of his Son. We have been the beneficiaries and have enjoyed 2,000 years of God’s grace. After God removes the Body of Christ God will inaugurate the prophetic “time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30.7) or the tribulation, as Jesus called it (Matthew 24.21, 9). During this time Israel will repent and return to God (Matthew 23.39). The result will be that “all Israel will be saved”. What did Paul mean by this? It meant that every Jew who survived the Tribulation would believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Peter had declared to the nation this

requirement in his first sermon after the ascension of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit. His message to “all the house of Israel” (Acts 2.36) was that every Jew had to repent (Acts 2.38, cf. 3.22-23). As Luke recorded in the book of Acts, that generation of Jews refused. However, a future generation of Jews will succeed. This fact is declared by the prophets (Isaiah 66.7-9, 25.9; Zechariah 12.10, 13.6).

Thus, Paul declared, quoting Isaiah 59.20-21, Jeremiah 31.33-34, Isaiah 27.9:

just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.” “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”

What was Paul’s conclusion? He wrote in verses 28-29:

²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Paul understood Israel’s situation and her future because God had revealed the secret (μυστήριον) of it to him. Paul had experienced the Jews as enemies of the gospel in his own ministry by their persecution of him and their rejection of Christ (Acts 13.46; 18.6; 28.28). Personally, Paul understood it (all too well!) because he had been the *leader* of the persecution before his conversion. Nevertheless, Paul declared that the offspring of Jacob were “beloved” because of the fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable”. God is sovereign and trustworthy. He sovereignly bestows gifts and keeps his promises.

He reminded his Gentile readers that just as they were once disobedient but had now received God’s mercy, Israel, who has

been disobedient, will receive mercy (Rom. 9.30-31). Thus, he concluded, “for God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” Each of us—Jew and Gentile—has failed (Romans 3.10-12 cf. Psalm 14.1-3; Romans 3.23). But God through his Son solved the sin problem through His death and resurrection and is able to provide mercy to all.

Romans 11.33-36

Conclusion

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* ³⁴ *For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?* ³⁵ *Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?* ³⁶ *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

Paul fittingly ended his great dissertation on God’s sovereign mercy with a paean of praise for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Most High God. God, because he is sovereign, is able to work all things for good to those who trust him. To him alone belongs all glory, praise, and honor.

¹ The translation, “may it never be!” for μὴ γένοιτο is anemic to modern ears. It fails to communicate the force of the negative. We would express it as “No way!”, Unthinkable!

² C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, T & T Clark, 1979, vol. 2, p. 448. Cranfield wrote, “It is only where the Church persists in refusing to learn this message, where it secretly—perhaps quite unconsciously!—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God’s mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God’s mercy for still unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His

people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church. These three chapters emphatically forbid us to speak of the Church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people. He then added in a footnote: But the assumption that the Church has simply replaced Israel as the people of God is extremely common. Thus Barrett, for example, writes: 'This fact reminds us that behind Paul's discussion there lies the historical background formed by the ministry of Jesus; his rejection and crucifixion by Israel [but such passages as 1 Th 2.15 and Acts 2.23; 4.10 certainly do not give those of us who are Gentiles any right to ignore the decisive part played by the Romans in the crucifixion of Jesus], which thereby disavowed its own place in God's plan; and the election of a new Israel in Christ to take the place of the old' (p. 191f). And I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church."

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