

# Why did God Choose a Particular People?

Romans 9:1-5 on September 17, 2023

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

*Please read Romans 9:1-5 before going further in this transcript.*

Last month we wrapped up the end of Romans 8 with a sermon about “Unflappable Faith.” We rejoiced in our assurance as Christians that absolutely NOTHING can separate us from the love of God! “...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>1</sup> Right after Paul celebrates the unshakable love of God, he then switches gears to an entirely different emotion as he begins Romans 9.

**1) Paul was in anguish for a particular people’s salvation.** In Romans 9:2-3 Paul exclaims, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.<sup>2</sup> For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.” Paul never actually specifies exactly what’s causing him such anguish, but it’s pretty clear from verse 3 that he’s concerned about their spiritual condition.<sup>3</sup> The source of his “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” is knowing that some of the people that he cared about most, don’t share in his same gospel assurance. The reason he mentions being “cut off from Christ” in v. 3, is it accurately describes their spiritual dilemma. His heart is heavy for those he loves, his own flesh and blood, his own kin.<sup>4</sup> So much so, that he could almost wish a curse upon himself, if that would make the difference in their salvation.<sup>5 6 7</sup> New Testament scholar Douglas Moo states plainly, “the problem of Israel is its failure to embrace the salvation offered in Christ.”<sup>8</sup> With this burden burning in his heart, Paul will then go on to talk about God’s sovereign gospel plan in Romans 9-11. Paul not only goes into detail over God’s plan for the salvation of Israel, but also His plan for all peoples. We’ll be taking a look at all of this, as we dig into the next 3 chapters. This fall, as we dive into Romans 9-11 together, we’ll uncover: “A Gospel for ALL Peoples”!

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Verse 1 begins, “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit.” “The conscience of those outside of Christ, while faulty, is nevertheless their best guide for conduct. But the believer has the privilege of a conscience informed by the Holy Spirit. Only then does conscience become a reliable guide for moral conduct.” Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 195.

<sup>3</sup> “The anguish of this reality was presumably so great that Paul could not even bring himself to enunciate it explicitly in verse 3.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 471.

<sup>4</sup> The ESV translates verse 3 “my kinsmen according to the flesh.”

<sup>5</sup> The word “cursed” in verse 3 is *anathema* in the Greek. It means, “delivered over to the wrath of God for eternal destruction.” NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1904 footnote on Romans 9:3.

<sup>6</sup> Consider 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Galatians 1:8. Our current nomenclature would include “damned to hell.”

<sup>7</sup> Today we might say, “I’d cut off my right arm!” Moses made a similar statement on behalf of Israel back in Exodus 32. The Israelite people felt that Moses was taking too long talking to God up on the mountain, so they made a golden calf to worship in the desert. When Moses learns about their terrible sin, He begs God to forgive them. Moses declares in Exodus 32:32, “But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” He loved his fellow Israelites SO much that he couldn’t bear the thought of having his own name in God’s book of life and not theirs. But see God’s reply in Exodus 32:33-35.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 132.

Israel's lackluster response to the gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't for lack of effort by Paul! Some of you may remember back to our study of the book of Acts: all throughout Paul's missionary journeys, his pattern was to go to the local, Jewish synagogues first. But he was consistently rebuffed and rejected by the local Jewish leaders. In Romans 10:1 Paul states it plainly, "...my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved." And later on in Romans 11:13-14, Paul will go on to admit that even as an apostle to the Gentiles, he has an ulterior motive: to make his fellow Jews jealous, "and thus save some of them." So clearly Israel's overall failure to embrace Christ wasn't for lack of effort on Paul's part. In Romans 9, Paul then goes on to highlight that it also wasn't for lack of spiritual opportunity...

**2) A particular people were given unique spiritual privileges.** In verses 4-5, Paul highlights many of the spiritual privileges that the Israelites had enjoyed throughout their long history as God's special, chosen people. Romans 9:4-5 says, "the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." "The people of Israel" were called "Israelites" because of their biological lineage through the patriarch Jacob. Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, and Jacob was renamed "Israel" by God Himself.<sup>9</sup> Then all of Jacob's descendants after him were called Israelites, in relation to his new name "Israel." My Study Bible points out that... "In New Testament times, Jews in the Holy Land used the title ["the people of Israel"] to indicate that they were the chosen people of God."<sup>10</sup> You see, they took pride in their special connection to Yahweh.<sup>11</sup> It was a special connection that came with lots of special privileges.

There were at least 8 Unique Spiritual Privileges that every ethnic Israelite enjoyed. Today we're going to take some time to look at each one of them briefly, so that we can gain a better grasp of the scope of Paul's words. Especially since the majority of us listening to this message are Gentiles, we need to increase our understanding of the situational background of the Israelite people. This will not only help us to better understand today's passage, but also get us warmed up for the verses ahead in Romans 9-11. You see, Romans 9-11 is loaded with all kinds of Old Testament references, so we'll need to get our head around the Israelite origin story. This will set us up to better understand what these chapters are trying to teach us about the gospel. Israel's 1<sup>st</sup> privilege was...

**1) Their adoption to sonship.** God warned Pharaoh back in Exodus 4:22-23, "...Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son." In Hosea 11:1 God says,

<sup>9</sup> See Genesis 32:28.

<sup>10</sup> NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1904 footnote on Romans 9:4.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, "Israel" probably means "he struggles with God." So the nation of Israel not only got its name, "Israel," but also its characterization as the "people who struggle with God" (and overcome!). (NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 64 footnote on Genesis 32:28.)

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." To be clear, this isn't referring to individual adoption into God's family, like "the adoption to sonship" that we learned about back in Romans 8.<sup>12</sup> This is referring to the corporate adoption of the Israelite people; the entire nation of Israel is referred to as God's son. This sonship brought with it many special privileges as well as certain expectations. In this context, every single person within the Israelite community, male and female, young and old, was adopted into a special favored status of sonship. This "adoption to sonship" is not only unique, in that it is corporate rather than individual, but also, in that it is about spiritual privilege rather than spiritual salvation. My Study Bible puts it this way: "While God's [individual] adoption of Christians secures their salvation, Israel's [corporate] 'sonship' means that the people received God's blessing and promises."<sup>13</sup> Israel's 2<sup>nd</sup> privilege was...

**2) The divine glory.** This refers to God's glorious, personal presence among His chosen people.<sup>14</sup> Exodus 16:10 says, "While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud."<sup>15</sup> A glorious cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night, was one of the unique ways in which God revealed His divine glory, among the Israelite people.<sup>16</sup> The LORD didn't do this for any other people, just this one particular people. God's glory was also present in the Holy of Holies, above the Ark of the Covenant, in both the tabernacle and the temple.<sup>17</sup> 2 Chronicles 7:1-2 records God's glory filling the temple, "When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it." Israel's 3<sup>rd</sup> privilege was...

**3) The covenants.** The various covenant promises to the Israelites are scattered all throughout their Old Testament history. They include covenants with Abraham, Moses, David, and several others.<sup>18 19</sup> For example, at Mount Sinai, God says to Moses in Exodus 19:5-6, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations YOU will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." The Israelites consistently found themselves right at the center of every one of these covenants, with a firsthand opportunity to rake in the promised blessings they offered. And although these covenants certainly had broader

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<sup>12</sup> See Romans 8:14-17.

<sup>13</sup> NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2308 footnote on Romans 9:4.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 474.

<sup>15</sup> See also Leviticus 9, especially verse 23. Also consider Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16, especially verses 19 and 42.

<sup>16</sup> See Exodus 13:21, 16:10. "The splendor of the divine presence (the "shekinah of God") accompanied them throughout their desert journeys." Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 196.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *Romans*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2022, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> See chart on p. 23 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Back in Romans 4 we took a closer look at God's covenant with Abraham, and how ultimately Abraham became the father of many nations because God's promise comes by faith.

implications for other people groups, one particular people were chosen to get a privileged, front row seat, every time.<sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> Israel's 4<sup>th</sup> privilege was...

**4) The receiving of the law.** This includes all of the regulations and guidelines given in the Old Testament, with an emphasis on the first five books of Moses. We Gentiles are usually most familiar with the 10 Commandments. Exodus 31:18 says, "When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God."<sup>22</sup> Think about that: the Jewish people had these words, inscribed by God's very own finger, delivered directly to them on actual physical tablets of stone (not to mention the 39 books of the Old Testament written on scrolls). Psalm 147:19-20 says, "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation...."<sup>23</sup> Living under God's law blessed the Jewish people with a rich understanding of His holiness, and it granted them the privilege of living under His protection and provision. The law contributed to an entire structure of theocracy that the Israelites enjoyed like no other people. Israel's 5<sup>th</sup> privilege was...

**5) The temple worship.** Initially the Israelites worshiped God in His tabernacle, a massive tent that they carried along with them during their wilderness wandering. But eventually the Jewish people built a temple in Jerusalem, where they could worship the living God and proclaim His truth and glory.<sup>24</sup> This temple worship came with exact instructions for how it should be built, and how its furnishings should be laid out, as well as details as to what kind of sacrifices were required for a God who is holy, holy, holy.<sup>25</sup> Israel's 6<sup>th</sup> privilege was...

**6) The promises.** We talked about the promises to Abraham back in Romans 4, but Paul is also referring here to the many Old Testament promises of a coming Messiah.<sup>26</sup> The Israelites were the initial recipients of those promises.<sup>27</sup> And even though these promises were intended to eventually bless all peoples, the Israelites had first dibs, when they were initially revealed to humankind. They were the entrusted caretakers of those promises, tasked with writing down the Hebrew Scriptures, and preserving them for all the world.<sup>28</sup> Israel's 7<sup>th</sup> privilege was...

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<sup>20</sup> Paul R. Williamson has a great essay on "Covenant" on pp. 2646-2648 in the NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015. See also <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-covenants/>

<sup>21</sup> These were "massive covenants with implications for land, for a future coming King, and for forgiveness of sin." <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/chosen-by-god-romans-8-28-30-9-1-29-part-2/>

<sup>22</sup> See also Exodus 32:15-16, 34:1; Deuteronomy 4:13, 9:10.

<sup>23</sup> See also Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

<sup>24</sup> See 1 Kings 6. Learn more on pp. 522-523 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See Hebrews 9:1 as well as Exodus 25:8-9 and following.

<sup>26</sup> For example Genesis 12:2-3 and Isaiah 9:6-7.

<sup>27</sup> These promises also included the Promised Land, which is the subject of much biblical debate, not to mention current political upheaval in our world today.

<sup>28</sup> These advantages were both privileges and responsibilities as the people closest to God's sovereign plans and workings in the world. It really is quite an advantage to have the very words of God, but Paul speaks of more than just having them, Paul says that the Jews have been ENTRUSTED with them. 1 Corinthians 4:2 says that "...those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

**7) The patriarchs.** These Jewish forefathers included Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Jacob's sons who made up the 12 tribes of Israel. We'll learn more about them as Romans 9 unfolds. For now, suffice it to say that several of these patriarchs are known as incredible heroes of the faith, due to their trust in God and their faithful obedience to Him.<sup>29</sup> Israel's 8<sup>th</sup> privilege was...<sup>30</sup>

**8) The human ancestry of Christ, the Messiah.** Jesus' human ancestry was an Israelite ancestry; His family tree is laid out for us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.<sup>31</sup> God used this particular people to provide the means by which the Christ could come in the flesh. Jesus was born of a young Israelite virgin; He was raised and cared for within an Israelite community.<sup>32</sup> This is perhaps the most enviable privilege of them all! Jesus fellow Israelites not only had the best access to the Messiah, but He also spoke their native tongue, and operated within their cultural norms. He ate the same foods, listened to the same music, read the same Holy Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> No other people group had this kind of privileged affinity!

This particular people, the Israelites, had so many unique spiritual privileges, it hardly seems fair to the rest of us! ...Which may cause us to ask some questions. First of all, with all of these many spiritual advantages, why did so many Jews reject their Messiah? Why is it so difficult for them to see that Jesus is the one that all of their history has been leading up to?<sup>34</sup> Well, Paul addresses this question in the next 3 chapters, and we'll talk about this more in the weeks ahead. This morning's text also begs another question:

**3) But why did God choose a particular people?** Why did He give the Israelites so many seemingly unfair advantages over the rest of us? It's completely natural for us Gentiles to wonder: Why did God choose a particular people in the first place? This morning's text doesn't really answer this question, but we can find at least some of the answer from other parts of the Bible. One reason that God chose a particular people is...

**1. For His own glory!** In 2 Samuel 7:23-24, King David declares, "And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have established your people Israel as your very own forever,

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<sup>29</sup> Consider Hebrews 11.

<sup>30</sup> By the way, Paul actually began this list way back in Romans 3:2, with yet another privilege, 9) Being entrusted with the very words of God.

<sup>31</sup> See Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

<sup>32</sup> Consider Luke 2:51-52.

<sup>33</sup> As modern-day Christ-followers we need to honor and recognize that our Savior comes from Israelite roots. His heritage and origin story is deeply woven into the tapestry of the people of Israel. Jesus' Israelite ancestry identifies Jesus' biological roots, it grounds Him in real time and human history, it underscores that He was indeed fully human in every sense of the word, and unveils His direct link to the gospel thread of God's Messianic timeline throughout human history. See Romans 1:3.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically, despite their front row seat to the unfolding of God's master gospel plan, their unbelief kept them from enjoying God's salvation.

and you, LORD, have become their God." God can do whatever He wants to do for His own glory. This is His prerogative; He is God after all! So one of the reasons that God chose a particular people, was for His own glory! Another reason that God chose a particular people is...

**2. To bring gospel blessing to all peoples!** In Genesis 12:3 the LORD tells Abraham, "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." From the very get-go, before the Israelites were even called Israelites, Father Abraham was given a promise that would bring God's blessing to all peoples, to every nation, tribe, and tongue. This particular people were raised up and chosen, to be a channel through whom God's blessing would flow to ALL peoples!<sup>35</sup> God choose one, to benefit many.<sup>36 37 38</sup> The fact is, all of humankind has benefited from God's unique purpose for this particular people group. With all of these admitted privileges, God expected much of the Israelite people. The Israelites were not only trusted with these privileges but also with the message and mission of the gospel that was intended to come forth FROM this spiritual heritage.<sup>39</sup> My Study Bible says it this way: "It was necessary that the invasion of this world by the gospel begin at a particular point, with a particular people, who in turn were responsible to carry that gospel to the other nations."<sup>40 41 42 43</sup> Getting the gospel to the other nations began in earnest at Pentecost in Jerusalem and then spread through the persecution of the early church, which was mostly made up of Israelites. It was then carried forward by Jewish missionaries like Paul and Barnabas. God choose a particular people to bring gospel blessing to all peoples! One other reason that God chose a particular people is...

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<sup>35</sup> "Israel was to be the catalyst through which God would accomplish his promises to the world. Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel in order that through his regathering and reconstituting the true Israel, the blessing of salvation would be released to flow from Israel and into all the world, just as God promised in the Old Testament."

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/why-did-jesus-say-he-came-only-for-israel/>

<sup>36</sup> "God chooses this one family to be the vehicle of his blessing to all families... God...[chose] one for the benefit of many." <https://bibleproject.com/articles/who-has-god-chosen/>

<sup>37</sup> At Mount Sinai, God says to Moses in Exodus 19:6-7, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." "The role of a priest is to mediate, or restore the relationship between two parties.... So Israel's role is to reconcile all the nations to Yahweh. Again, God chooses one out of the many, so that the many would be blessed. But how will they do this? ...Israel is meant to faithfully represent God by how they live as a community of love, justice, and worship of Yahweh alone. This is what the law is all about. Israel is... chosen for... a purpose. They are called to display who Yahweh is to all the nations, so that all would come to know and worship the one true God." <https://bibleproject.com/articles/who-has-god-chosen/>

<sup>38</sup> These many privileges came along with a responsibility to share this blessing with ALL other peoples. This may well be why God located Israel in the promised land, smack dab in the middle of the surrounding nations, so that all the world would be in range of them and could hear about the one true God.

<sup>39</sup> "The Jewish nation was to be the guardian of all that God had revealed through his spokesmen. Of all the nations on earth God had chosen the Jews to be the custodians of his redemptive plan for the human race." Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 104.

<sup>40</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1890-1891, footnote on Romans 1:16.

<sup>41</sup> In a similar way, God expects much of you and me. Even though most of us at E-Free Bemidji aren't Jewish, we have been given MUCH. Much spiritual knowledge and training. Much access to God's Word. Much in resources to be stewarded for God's gospel purposes in this world. "With spiritual privilege comes spiritual responsibility." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1892, footnote on Romans 2:9.

<sup>42</sup> Consider Amos 3:1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 12:47-48 says it this way, "The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

**3. To provide the origins for a fully human Messiah.** In order for God to take on flesh and display his full humanity, Jesus needed to live at some time in real human history. He needed to have a legitimate human lineage, which required Him to come from one particular people group or another. God sovereignly decided that the Savior of the world would have a clearly Jewish lineage. So, this one particular people provided the foundational framework from which one particular person would come, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!<sup>44</sup> It would be a mistake for us, as Gentiles, if we were to dismiss all of this Old Testament background as somehow unimportant or irrelevant to us. All of these historical Jewish privileges are foundational to Christianity, and to salvation history, and to the origins of the gospel. These unique privileges not only help us to rightly understand where the gospel came from, and what the gospel means for the human race, but they also reveal the very building blocks upon which the gospel was developed over the course of human history. Out of His great kindness and mercy, God spent thousands of years of human history fashioning “A Gospel for All Peoples.” That fashioning was intricately intertwined with the Israelite people.<sup>45</sup>

Well today’s text is just the beginning of our journey into Ethnic Israel’s spiritual situation; we’ll learn more in the coming weeks. For today, let’s conclude with a more immediate application: **For which particular people’s salvation are you in anguish?** Paul began Romans 9 by expressing his “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” over his spiritually lost kin. Perhaps some of us feel a similar sorrow for some of very own family members, or perhaps a close friend or an associate from work?<sup>46</sup> You know, Paul could have begun Romans 9 quite differently; he could have written off his fellow Jews as a lost cause. After all, they’d had every spiritual privilege, every advantage, every opportunity to follow Christ, and yet they still turned away from the living God and rejected Jesus. But instead of writing them off, or despising them for their hardhearted rebellion, Paul wept for them. When was the last time that you and I have wept for the lost? Not just felt sorry for them, or pitied them, but actually shed tearful prayers for their salvation? **Oh Lord, give us tears for the lost!**

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<sup>44</sup> See <https://bibleproject.com/articles/who-has-god-chosen/>

<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, I think many of us must admit that we tend to be a bit tough on the Old Testament Israelites, as if we would have done any better. Rather than allowing our own spiritual pride and arrogance form our opinion of the Jewish people, we should be extremely grateful for their immense historical contributions to the gospel’s foundations, imperfect as those contributions may have been.

<sup>46</sup> Much like Paul, it can be exceedingly difficult for us to get excited about the glories of heaven, when we know all too well that some of the people closest to our hearts are not currently on the path of salvation.