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*In the first half of Romans, Paul laid out the treasure of the Gospel of God's righteousness for sinners. His concern for the Jews launches the second half of Romans. His anguish is at the heart of Chapters 9-11 in particular.*



## PAUL'S ANGUISH OVER ISRAEL

### ANGUISH FOR OTHERS

A young couple sat by the bedside of their infant daughter in the NICU. Tears filled their eyes as they watched her struggle to breathe. "If I could," the new father told the chaplain with a sob, "I would give up my life so that she could live." We experience anguish when we see people in distress. Images of people whose homes have been destroyed by a tornado or of the bloodied victims of terrorist attacks provoke profound sorrow in us and a desire to help.

That sorrow runs deepest when those people in distress are friends or members of our own families, especially when that distress is about spiritual matters. A spouse who refuses to come to church with us. A child who has drifted from the faith or been caught up in a cult. A friend once close, but now estranged and hostile to what we hold dear. Perhaps you have said, with tears, "I would do anything!" to bring that person back to faith or friendship. An old hymn encourages the congregation to pray:

*Lord, lay some soul upon my heart/ And love that soul through me;  
And may I bravely do my part/ To win that soul for Thee.*

Paul felt such anguish not just for "some soul," but for a whole nation of people – his people, the Jews. His sorrowful experience was that the



majority of those Jews that heard the Gospel rejected it. Like the father of that hospitalized baby, Paul was willing to suffer anything, even sacrifice his salvation, to win them to their promised Messiah. In the first half of Romans, Paul laid out the treasure of the Gospel of God's righteousness for sinners. His concern for the Jews launches the second half of Romans. His anguish is at the heart of Chapters 9–11 in particular. The number of Old Testament references increases dramatically in these three chapters (35 direct citations in 90 verses!) as Paul "seeks to show that Israel's unbelief, though paradoxical, is neither unexpected nor final." (Middendorf)

This section of Romans feels especially timely. The tiny nation of Israel is still at center stage in our world's drama, still the subject of great anguish! Paul here challenges us to rethink the meaning of "Israel." Meanwhile his words lift our hearts by reminding us of the patient, persistent mercy of God toward His people then and now.

### PAUL'S ANGUISH AND HIS IMPOSSIBLE WISH

#### ROMANS 9:1–5

In 9:1, Paul's "tone shifts dramatically from celebration to lamentation" (Douglas Moo). In the face of the astonishing grace of God, many of Paul's own Jewish people, the ones for whom God prepared this feast of righteousness, have refused it (as in Acts 13:45–46). The very people to whom the Messiah was promised, who waited centuries for Him, have failed to recognize Him. Incredible!

How does Paul react? Not with anger, but with "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (v. 2). So urgent is his concern that he makes a solemn vow about the truth of these feelings and the astonishing (impossible!) wish it produces in him. "I could wish that I myself were accursed [the Greek word is *anathema*] and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers" (v. 3). Paul would willingly forfeit his own salvation if by so doing he could secure theirs! Moses made a similar prayer after the Israelites' golden calf rebellion: "But now, if you will forgive their sin — but if not, please blot me out of your book" (Ex. 32:32). God did not, of course,

grant that prayer either for Moses or for Paul, but the anguish of these two great men is a window through which we see the anguished heart of God and the astonishing obedience of Jesus, who did this very thing — became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) and suffered the separation of hell itself to bring us back to God.

The unbelief of the Jews is especially saddening to Paul because of the spiritual advantages God granted them. There follows a list in verses 4–5. Theirs is "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race...is the Christ..." All of that God gave them, and still they say "no" to the Gospel!

This leaves Paul with some haunting questions: "With all these advantages, why have they not believed?" "Has God failed them?"

### GOD'S WORD HAS NOT FAILED!

#### ROMANS 9:6–13

Paul immediately answers that question: "it is not as though the word of God has failed" (v. 6). Why not? Because "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel"! That must have been a bombshell to his readers who were, like many of us, used to thinking of "Israel" as the nation inhabiting Canaan, or as a single ethnic group called "the Jews." In other words, Israel's failure to believe doesn't indicate a failure on God's part, for "ethnic Israel" is not the true Israel!

The proof for this audacious declaration, Paul says, is right under your nose in the Old Testament. Paul invites us once more to consider the history of the patriarchs in Genesis, particularly the stories of Abraham and Isaac. The story of Abraham's sons Ishmael and Isaac (Genesis 16–21) is well-known. Both boys are his "children" (Greek *tekna*), albeit from different mothers. But only one merits being called his "offspring" (v. 7 — Greek *sperma*, translated "seed" in KJV). Ishmael was the product of human effort, plain and simple. Isaac alone is the product of the promise ("Sarah shall have a son" — Gen. 18:10), a pure gift of God to post-menopausal Sarah. Ishmael is a "child of Abraham," but not reckoned as part of the "people of promise" that Paul says is the true Israel.

The next example strengthens his argument. He holds before the readers two more sons, these from same father and mother, conceived by a single sexual act — the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob. God’s surprising choice of the younger Jacob over his older brother Esau took place before they were born “and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God’s purpose of election might continue” (v. 11). We are jolted by the summary in verse 13: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (quoting Mal. 1:2–3). What? God “hated”? But these words do not describe any enmity on God’s part. In this context “love” indicates God’s decision to choose Jacob, and “hate” indicates His decision to bypass or disregard the older brother Esau. The same verb (“hate”) is used later in Genesis to describe Jacob’s preference for Rachel over Leah (Gen. 29:30–33). He does not “hate” Leah. But he *does* prefer Rachel! Michael Middendorf helpfully proposes translating this word as “spurned” rather than “hated.”

With these two examples, Paul has moved us toward a narrower understanding of “Israel” as the “children of the promise” rather than “all physical descendants of Abraham.” Isaac and Jacob are children of the promise, the true Israel. Ishmael and Esau are not. The initiative is God’s. His doing, not our deeds. As Jesus said to His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). My doing, not yours! The faith of some Jews and the unbelief of many others had to happen, for thereby we discern the true Israel.

### THE MERCIFUL CALL

#### ROMANS 9:14–18

Now looms another question. Once more Paul dialogues with an invisible opponent. “Isn’t choosing one and bypassing another unjust?” The question brings to mind the parable of the workers in the vineyard who complain about the owner’s generosity to latecomers (Matt. 20:1–16). There, and here, God’s choice is not based on human accomplishment but on His undeserved mercy.

In answer, Paul lets God speak for Himself with two

quotes. The first in verse 15 is from Ex. 33:19, where God reveals His compassionate nature to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.” Since we humans are “sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14), it is not “justice” that we are getting, but a wondrous mercy. It does not depend on “human will or exertion” (v. 16). That’s more than “just”! Aren’t you glad?

The second quote, in verse 17, is a word from God to Pharaoh during the Exodus story. “I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you” (Ex. 9:16). Pharaoh is to be part of God’s intended “delivery system” out of slavery for the Israelites, just as He later used the Persian King Cyrus to bring the Israelites home out of exile (2 Chron. 36:22–23). But Pharaoh digs in his heels and resists. Again we are jolted in verse 18: “he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” What? God “hardens”?

If it sounds like God arbitrarily decided to “harden” Pharaoh just to score a victory over him, we must re-read the story of the plagues (Exodus 7–12). In the first five plagues, “he [Pharaoh] hardened his heart” (8:15). Not until plague six, for the first time, do we read that “the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (9:12). God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a RESPONSE to Pharaoh’s repeated resistance of God’s will for him. Elsewhere in the New Testament the hardening of hearts is not portrayed as God’s doing but as a sinful human response to God’s proffered mercy. In Acts 19:8–9, for example, “some became hardened” in response to Paul’s preaching.

The “hardening” of Pharaoh is being repeated in the hard-hearted resistance of his Jewish compatriots to the Gospel. In spite of this, Paul will demonstrate, God’s aim is always mercy.

### THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

#### ROMANS 9:19–23

Now comes a second objection the opponent raises in verse 19. “Why does he [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?” In summary, God is unjust!

John Calvin’s explanation was to posit “double predestination,” the notion that God chose to save some and to damn others. In other words, the reason those Jews don’t believe is because God destined them to damnation.

To answer this objection, Paul uses yet another Old Testament illustration — the potter and the clay. This metaphor is a familiar one (see Is. 29:16 and 45:9; Jer. 18:6). God is not “unjust.” He is the Potter simply doing what a potter must do — making vessels for a variety of uses. The clay a potter uses doesn’t talk back to him — so, says Paul, why are you questioning God?

God the Potter is making vessels for two kinds of use. He chooses “to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use” (v. 21). But isn’t this just what Calvin is saying, that God makes some for salvation and some for damnation? Actually, no! The issue here (as with “love” and “hate” in verse 13) is a misleading translation. The Greek word *atimian*, here translated “dishonorable,” actually means “for ordinary use.” The very same pairing of words is used by Paul himself in 2 Tim. 2:20 about the vessels used in a home. Some are “gold and silver” (“honorable” = for special occasions!) and some are “wood and clay” (“dishonorable” = for everyday use). In the same way, God makes all people useful, some in more “honored” ways than others.

The fact that some people wind up condemned (“vessels of wrath” in verse 22) is not because God arbitrarily chose that destiny for them, but because they, like old Pharaoh, rejected His offer of mercy. It is God’s nature to show BOTH His “wrath” against sin and His power to save. Meanwhile, He has been incredibly patient with a stubborn, sinful humanity. That patience was always meant to lead people to repentance (2:4), but if it is rejected, “the judgment of God rightly falls” (2:2)!

Meanwhile, God “prepared beforehand” the “riches

of his glory for vessels of mercy” (v. 23). His ultimate will, Paul will say later, is to “have mercy on all” (11:32), “to allow the possibility ... that the vessels of wrath ... will become vessels of mercy” (Dunn). As Paul will put it, “I magnify my ministry [to Gentiles] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them” (11:13b–14).

### MY PEOPLE!

#### ROMANS 9:24–29

So how can we know that mercy is OURS, whether we are Jews or Gentiles? Paul returns to a word he has used repeatedly since the beginning of the letter. God is the “one who calls” (literal rendering of the Greek in 9:11). That word anchors two quotes from Hosea that underscore God’s deliberate call, even to those Gentiles who were “not my people” (Hos. 2:23, cited in v. 25), people once simply vessels of wrath! Hosea 1:10 is cited in the next verse, adding that those called become “sons of the living God.” There is a merciful call to Gentiles. You have heard it, Paul tells his readers. Therein lies your certainty.

You Jews have heard it too, he adds! From the Jews God continues to call “a remnant” (Is. 10:22–23, cited in v. 27). Though many Jews have refused, SOME have said yes to that call in Christ. A Jew may say that God has, in fact “left us offspring” (Is. 1:9, cited in v. 29). The mention of Sodom and Gomorrah recalls the story of Abraham’s anguished prayer for the wicked city and the sparing of his family (Gen. 18:22–33). The city was finally destroyed, but Lot and his little family were the tiny remnant that survived. You can almost hear Paul say to himself, “There is always a remnant!”

“Remnant” is a hopeful word that remembers the survival of Lot, the community’s continuation after the destruction of northern Israel in 722 BC and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the return of the remnant from exile. It is a Gospel word that speaks hope for the future of Israel, even in the face of the apostle’s anguish for her.

## PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 9:30–10:21

*Lord God, when I am tempted to despair over my place in Your plan, lift me again by Your promised mercy. Encourage me just now in my study of this great letter! Show me how I may bless someone else. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

For Review:

1. How does Paul use two Old Testament stories of sons to begin explaining the “true Israel”?

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2. The translator’s choice of words can dramatically color our understanding of a passage. What alternate translations did we consider for these pairs of words?

“Love” and “hate” –

“Honorable” and “dishonorable” –

3. With what did you find yourself wrestling in Chapter 9? Share whatever still feels like a “loose end” to you.

Romans 9:30–10:5

4. What great irony does Paul describe in vv. 30–31?

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5. Who or what is the “stone” to which Paul refers in verse 32?

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6. Paul quotes the Old Testament in verse 33. Read the sources of the quote in Is. 28:16 and 8:14. What was the original intent for this stone?

What was the actual result for those who did not “believe in him”?

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7. If your neighbor asked you, “What’s the difference between Christianity and other religions?” what would you say?

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8. On the basis of 10:1–2, how would you respond if that person said, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere”?

Romans 10:6–15

9. Paul quotes Deut. 30:11–14. What do you think was Moses' original point here?

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10. What does Paul add in vv. 6–8 in order to “recycle” that message for us?

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11. Verse 9 is sometimes displayed prominently in the end zone at televised football games. Why do you think would someone do that?

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12. God does not “jump on people in dark alleys”! According to vv. 14–15, what instead does He customarily use to bring people to salvation?

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13. Who had the “beautiful feet” in your life?

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Romans 10:16–21

14. Some people say, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” Why does Paul stress hearing (v. 17) rather than seeing?

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15. According to vv. 18–19, what are two excuses Israel might have made for not coming to faith in Jesus as the Christ?

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What’s Paul’s answer to each?

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16. How does v. 21 address those who say the reason for Israel’s unbelief is that God has predestined some for damnation?

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### Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 10

Rom. 10:9 *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*