

## A Study in the Book of Romans

# 23

## Romans 9:1-16

### Key Verse

“ It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. ”

The next three chapters of **Romans** seem to be a digression of thought by Paul, and because of this, many have felt they should be treated as a study on their own. Some have actually suggested it is better to skip these three chapters and continue from the end of **Romans 8** straight on to **Romans 12** – then to study **Romans 9-11** at another time.

But far from this being the correct method of study, it is absolutely *essential* to study these three chapters exactly in the place Paul wrote them. They must be read in the context of the whole letter, for they can only be understood in the light of the Gospel he has just unfolded in **Romans 1-8**! For **Romans 9-11**, Paul explains the Gospel’s relationship to the promises God had made to Israel, and the tragedy of Israel’s rejection of the long-awaited Messiah.

In the first seven chapters of **Romans**, Paul has described in vivid detail the Gospel’s answers to the three principal problems of mankind:

- ➔ The *penalty* of sinful acts (**Romans 1-3**)
- ➔ The *power* of the sinful nature (**Romans 5-6**)
- ➔ The *prison* of the sin-focused Law (**Romans 7**)

Now, starting in **Romans 9**, Paul brings the Gospel’s answer to the issue of the rejection *by* Israel of the very Gospel promised by God *to* Israel.

#### Introduction

#### The Gospel’s Three Revelations

#### The Gospel’s Three Answers

#### **The Gospel’s Answer to Israel**

#### The Gospel in Action

#### Conclusion

## Two Important Keys

There are two important keys to understanding what Paul is saying in **Romans 9-11**, and if we keep them continually in mind as we study these three chapters, we will not take what Paul says beyond what he is meaning (note the principle found in **1 Corinthians 4:6**).

### ***Faith***

Again we must emphasize that it is vital to keep constantly in mind all that Paul has said to this point. His emphasis throughout his letter has been that salvation and righteousness is found by faith in the work of Christ on the Cross – and by faith alone! His main point in these chapters, as he looks into the problem of the Jews having rejected the Gospel (which is the fulfillment of the Promise to Abraham and his “seed”), is that they have stumbled at faith, trying instead to find righteousness on their own. He states this clearly in **9:30-33**:

“What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it *not by faith* but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone’. As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’”

Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* summarizes Paul’s message in **Romans 9-11**:

“How can we sum this up? All those people who didn’t seem interested in what God was doing actually *embraced* what God was doing as he straightened out their lives. And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their ‘God projects’ that they didn’t notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling.”

And, in **9:6-8**, Paul re-emphasizes that faith in Christ is the only criterion for being heirs to the Promise:

“It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.”

### ***Israel’s purpose as a nation***

In **Romans 9-11**, Paul is explaining with natural Israel’s rejection of the Gospel. He speaks much of the special “election” of the Jewish nation, so it is important to remember that this is referring to the purpose God had for them in history. As we

saw previously, election is *always* according to purpose, and natural Israel's purpose was the ushering in of the Savior to the world. All of the Law, the covenants, the sacrifices and God's dealings with them as a people were a means to this end.

It is in this context that Paul draws two examples from the Old Testament:

- ☞ The choosing of Jacob and not Esau (**9:10-13**)
- ☞ The hardening of stubborn Pharaoh (**9:14-18**)

It is important to realize that Paul is not here speaking of individual salvation and eternal destiny, but of involvement in God's purposes in the history of man.

Israel's rejection of the Gospel was a real problem that needed to be explained. If the Gospel that Paul preached really was the truth, how then was it possible that the nation to whom all the promises relating to it had been given could reject it? Surely had Paul's claims been valid the Jewish people would have been the first to acknowledge them! And if the Gentiles were now accepted, justified, and heirs of Abraham's Promise – on an equal footing with the Jews – what about Israel's special covenant relationship with God? It seemed that instead of the Messiah bringing the promised salvation for Israel, those to whom the covenant promises were given were apparently shut out and all the longed-for benefits were going to Gentile outsiders!

This is the problem that Paul sets out to answer in these three chapters.

## **A Brief Outline of Chapters 9-11**

Let's take a quick bird's eye survey of **Romans 9-11**.

### ***Romans 9:1-29***

Paul shows that Israel's rejection of the Gospel was not a failure of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants, for the promise was meant only for Abraham's "spiritual" children – those who had faith in the Promise as Abraham did. These true Jews, along with the believing Gentiles, were receiving salvation just as God had promised they would, and just as the prophets had foretold it would be.

### ***Romans 9:30-10:21***

Paul shows that the reason Israel was being rejected and the Gentiles were being saved was the different way the two groups were responding to the Gospel. The Jews were stumbling at the simplicity of faith in Christ, whereas the Gentiles were embracing that simple faith in Christ. Israel had misunderstood and misused the Law. Instead of acknowledging their own sinfulness as they saw the contrast between their own conduct and the Law's holy requirements, and instead of turning to the Lord for mercy and forgiveness, they were trying to establish a righteousness of their own by keeping its commands. They were looking to the Law, and not to the Gospel, for salvation and therefore were rejected.

***Romans 11:1-32***

Paul explains that Israel's rejection is not total. Some Jews *were* believing in Christ and being saved! Neither was this apparent rejection final. Just as the Old Testament prophets had seen ahead and prophesied of the great response of the Gentiles to the Gospel, so Paul sees ahead and prophesies of Israel's great turning to faith in their Messiah in the last days.

***Romans 11:33-36***

In conclusion to his treatise on the issue of Israel's rejection, Paul ends with a beautiful doxology – a declaration of praise and adoration in view of God's wisdom expressed in the Gospel.

**Paul's Love for His Own Race****Read Romans 9:1-3**

We have to remember that Paul himself was a Jew. Therefore Paul is not writing in anger, but in heartbreak. After expressing in **Romans 8**, in a sense of wondrous joy, inspired by the glorious results of the Gospel, Paul now expresses a great heaviness of heart – because his own race, who were the chosen vehicle for bringing the Gospel into being, had rejected the very purpose for their existence. They were like a mother who for nine months had nurtured and nourished the unborn child within her but who, from the time of its birth, had rejected it and refused to acknowledge it as her own.

Paul had been accused of being a traitor to his race, and an advocate of sinning against the Law (**Acts 21:20-36**). Everywhere he went, his fellow-Jews persecuted him (**2 Corinthians 11:23-27**). But far from feeling resentment or bitterness towards them, Paul's heart is breaking for them. And he wants the church at Rome (especially his Jewish readers) to understand his deep love and constant concern for those of his race who were not yet believers.

In fact, he expresses his love for them in the strongest way he possibly can – a desire that, if it had been granted, would have amounted to a supreme sacrifice. He stands, as did Moses hundreds of years before (**Exodus 32:32-33**), and says he would sooner the Lord cut him off if it meant the Jews would be saved. Paul has just expressed a truth that was very real to him – nothing could separate him from Christ's love (**8:35-39**) – but, he says, if it would do anything to save his fellow-countrymen, he would accept even banishment from God. Though he knows it isn't possible, it is a heart-felt expression of the depth of his desire for Israel. His heart was like that of the God he loved and served – a God who had loved so much that he had been willing to sacrifice himself to save the ones he loved!

**Read Philippians 2:5-8**

Paul is expressing the attitude of Christ in **Romans 9:1-3**. These three verses express both his great love for Israel and his deep anguish for his people.

## The Blessings of Israel

### Read Romans 9:4-5

In these two verses, Paul lists all the blessings the Jews had received – blessings that should have been the *stepping-stones* into their receiving the full outworking of them in the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

- **The adoption as sons** – God had called Israel his “son” – collectively (**Exodus 4:22**) and individually (**Hosea 1:10**). They were called his “first-born” out of all the nations.
- **The divine glory** – Israel had seen the cloud of God’s glory descend upon Moses’ Tabernacle (**Exodus 40:34-35**) and later on Solomon’s Temple (**2 Chronicles 5:13-14**) as a token of his presence dwelling among them.
- **The covenants** – God had dealt personally with Israel all through her history in all the covenants he had made with her, through Abraham (**Genesis 15:18**), through Moses (**Exodus 24:8**), through Joshua (**Joshua 1:1-9**) and through David (**2 Samuel 23:5**).
- **The receiving of the Law** – Israel had received the “schoolmaster” (KJV), the one “put in charge” (NIV), designed by God to point them to their need of Christ (**Galatians 3:23-26**).
- **The temple worship** – Israel had even received all the sacrifices and ceremonies, each of which pointed ahead to the coming of the Savior and his once-for-all sacrifice.
- **The promises** – Israel had received promise after promise from God, including the promise of the coming Messiah.
- **The patriarchs** – The nation of Israel was founded on men of faith who looked for God’s eternal city (**Hebrews 11:8-10** – read the whole chapter). Theirs was the example that God had purposed Israel to emulate.
- **The human descendancy of Christ** – Christ, who is “God over all, for ever praised,” had come as one of them! Israel had had the privilege of bringing forth the Savior, and he had been revealed in their midst! (**1 John 1:1-3**).

But instead of the things being *stepping stones* into the experience of the Gospel, they ended up being *stumbling blocks*. As John laments in **John 1:11**:

“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

### The Big Question

In view of all this, the big question arises: “How could they have missed it?” This is the problem Paul sets out to solve in these next three chapters. He does it by answering six major questions that arise in the light of Israel’s rejection of the Gospel:

- Did God's Word fail? (9:6-13)
- Is God unjust? (9:14-18)
- Why does God still blame us if we have fulfilled his will? (9:19-29; 10:1-21)
- Did Israel not hear and not understand? (10:18-19)
- Did God reject his people? (11:1-10)
- Did Israel stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? (11:11-32)

We will discover the answers to these questions in this lesson and the lessons that lie ahead. But let's start off with the first question.

## Did God's Word Fail?

Paul takes it for granted that this question is being asked, and so sets about to answer it (9:6). It is obvious from the context that "God's word" is referring particularly to the Abrahamic covenant (9:7-10). In other words, the question is:

"If the Gospel is the fulfillment of God's word ('the Promise') to Abraham and his descendants, why have his descendants rejected it? Did God's word fail to come to pass?"

Paul's answer is simple. He repeats what he has already stated in **Romans 2** and **Romans 4**:

"Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel!"

It is important to remember that Paul is building upon the foundation he has already laid in his letter. He has already made it clear that:

- True circumcision is of the heart (2:17-29)
- In God's eyes, a man is a Jew if one inwardly (2:17-29)
- Abraham's true children are those who receive the Promise by faith as he did (4:16,22-24)

Now Paul repeats and underlines this again in 9:7-8. As he develops his answer through the next three chapters, Paul will show that:

- **True Israel are those of faith in the promise (9:6-8)** – In other words, the Abrahamic promise, which is fulfilled in the Gospel, was not to *all* his natural descendants, but applied to *those of faith*. We see this principle at work in Israel's entry into the Promised Land. Even though the first generation was Hebrews by birth, unbelief disqualified them from entering into God's promise. It was the *next* generation – a generation both naturally *and* spiritually descended from Abraham – that was able to enter into God's promises – by faith and obedience to their covenant with God.
- **Most of natural Israel failed to receive the Gospel because they stumbled at faith, trying instead to gain righteousness by their own works (9:30-33, 10:1-21)** – The problem was never with God's Word to Israel, but with Israel's response to God's Word.



- ☞ **Not all Israel has rejected the Gospel** – Some have accepted (e.g. Paul himself). There is a remnant of the Jews who have believed (**11:1-7**).

In other words, true Israel *has* believed, and thus God's Word has not failed!

**Read Galatians 3:6-9,14,26-29**

## **The Selection of the Natural Line**

In order to prove to the Jews that only a *remnant* of Israel are the *true* Israel, Paul uses God's selection of the natural line as an illustration.

Abraham had two sons (in fact, he had more, as we discover in **Genesis 25:1-6**), but it was through the line of Isaac that the Promise would come – not Ishmael or Abraham's other sons. Every Jew would have immediately agreed with Paul. Not one of them would have considered Ishmael's descendants (the Arabs) heirs of the Promise of Abraham.

But Paul doesn't stop there. Isaac also had two sons, he explains, but it was through the line of Jacob, not Esau, that the Promise was to be fulfilled. Again the Jews would have agreed with him, for not one of them would have considered Esau's descendants (the Edomites) heirs of the Promise. In this way, Paul makes the point that throughout Old Testament history God's purpose was handed down through an inner group, a fact that the Jews could not deny – and a principle, says Paul, that *still* applied now that the Gospel had come. Just as God chose some to be the natural line to bring the Promise into being, so he has chosen a spiritual line, marked by those who have the same faith as Abraham, who will be heirs of that Promise.

At this point, Paul begins to explain the concept of God's election. Within this passage we can see that Paul is speaking of a *dual* election:

- ☞ The natural election of Israel – *the natural line*
- ☞ The election of the true seed of Abraham – *the spiritual line*

The process of selection that Paul uses as an illustration focuses on the natural line of descent for the coming of Christ. It was impossible for every single person to be a natural ancestor of Jesus. The line had to be narrowed down. God's choice, says Paul had nothing to do with the goodness or badness of the one chosen, and he uses Esau and Jacob as an example. The choice was made before they were born or had done anything good or bad. It was a choice purely by God's own sovereign decision. This was so that "God's purpose in election might stand" (**9:12**).

What then was "God's purpose in [the] election" of the natural line? It was to bring Christ, his Son, into the world.

## **The Selection of the Spiritual Line**

Not only does Paul prove that the selection of the few out of the many has always been the case in Israel, but also he brings out how the two main principles that

applied to the founding fathers of Israel still apply as the founding principles of the True Israel.

### ***Promise, as with Isaac***

#### **Read Romans 9:6-9**

Just as Isaac was the child of faith in a Promise, so the true Israel, who are a remnant within the natural Israel, are those who have faith in the Promise as Abraham did – and these are the Israel to whom God's Word applies.

### ***Election, as with Jacob***

#### **Read Romans 9:10-12**

Just as the choice of Jacob was not based on any good work that he had done, but purely by the sovereign will of God, so the true Israel is chosen out of the whole, not by their works, but by God's sovereign will. And, as Paul has been revealing all through his letter so far, God has, in his sovereign will, chosen the *way* he selects those who will be his children and heirs. He has sovereignly decided it will be those who respond by faith in his Son!

As we shall see in the next lesson, the key to what Paul is saying is found in the distinction between these two lines. Whereas God's purpose in the election of the natural line was *to bring his Son into the world*, his purpose in the election of the spiritual line is *to bring many sons into glory!*

#### **Read Hebrews 2:10-13**

## **Is God Unjust?**

This question comes right in the middle of Paul's answer to the first question, "Did God's Word fail?" Paul "interrupts" himself, as he expounds his answer concerning the true Israel, in order to answer arguments and objections that obviously arise in the light of what he is saying. He has just made the point that God's sovereign election has never been and never will be by works, and so uses the election of the natural line as an example – specifically, the choosing of Jacob over Esau. He is making the point that the principles of God's election have *never* changed, but remain "standing" forever. These principles are:

### ***It is not by works...***

Paul proves that God's choice of Jacob was made not because of any works Jacob had done (nothing that Jacob had done to *earn* God's favor), because God's choice was made *before* Jacob and Esau were born. And, Paul is saying, what is true of the natural line is also true of the spiritual line.

We need to realize, however, that Paul is *not* saying that God chooses who will be a Christian and who will not before a person is born, for this is not the context of his line of thought. No, the principle that Paul is emphasizing is that, like Jacob, the choice is *not made according to our works*.



***...But by him who calls***

God's selection is by his own will, so as to fulfill his plan and purpose. In the case of the natural line, as we have seen, this was to bring the Savior into the world. But the principle still applies in the case of the spiritual line. The call has gone out, through the Gospel, to the whole world – the call to believe in the Savior. John makes the wonderful proclamation in **John 1:12-13**:

“...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”

Those who believe (who respond to the Gospel with faith) then enter into the special call and purpose that God has pre-ordained for eternity.

**Read Ephesians 3:4-11**

The Jews would not object to Paul making the point that Jacob was chosen and not Esau, and it was understood that this was related to the natural line. No, the big stumbling block to the Jews in Paul's day was that they were trying to gain righteousness by their own works (**9:30-33**) and Paul is saying: “God has never worked on that basis! He didn't in the choosing of the natural line with Jacob, and he hasn't in the choosing of the spiritual line!”

We can imagine their response to what Paul is saying:

“Is that fair? When a man really tries hard and desires to do his best in doing good in God's eyes, is it fair that God should say ‘won't even consider his works – that his election of men is not based on that? Isn't God being unjust? Why would God not have mercy on us when we are zealous for him and trying to obey the Law?”

**Note Romans 10:1-4**

Paul's answer is to quote the Lord's words to Moses in **Exodus 33:19**:

“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy...”

This statement reveals three main points:

***We have no rights to God's mercy***

In answering the unspoken challenge – “Is God being fair?” – Paul brings us right back to “square one.” He makes no attempt to “defend” God; rather, he makes very clear the situation as it really stands. Man has no claim on God's mercy whatsoever. He made this all too clear in the first three chapters of his letter when he revealed the absolute degradation of mankind (both Jew and Gentile) in their sin and rebellion against God. Man, Paul is saying, does not deserve mercy; he deserves judgment. He is guilty and is receiving his just desserts. He has no right to demand mercy from God any more than a hardened criminal, sentenced for a hideous crime, could stand up before his judge, claim that he is being unfair,

and demand mercy. No, mercy does not come from man's demands for he has no rights to it. It comes from the graciousness of God alone!

### ***It is God's sovereign right to have mercy on whom he wills***

The right to dispense mercy lies solely in God's hands. God is God and can do exactly as he wishes. He need not show mercy on anyone – or, if he so desired, could show mercy on one and not another – totally at God's prerogative! It is entirely *within his rights* to express or withhold mercy as he so chooses! Thus the receiving of God's mercy is not based on what we want, or any effort we may make to get it (9:16). The initiative lies *wholly* with God himself.

### ***God has sovereignly chosen to have mercy on those of faith!***

With an understanding of the first two truths, how much more we can now appreciate the wonder of God's mercy! How grateful we are that God is the kind of God he is – that his character, revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ, is one of love and grace (John 1:16-18). It is because of this love and grace that we receive his mercy – and he has made it available to *every* person through Christ!

### **Read Romans 11:32**

By God's own sovereign decision, prompted by his great love, he sent his Son to take the judgment of mankind upon himself, and has sent out an open invitation to receive that work personally. He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...", and the wonderful news of the Gospel is that God has chosen to have mercy on are those who receive by faith the sacrifice of his Son on their behalf!

The Bible presents in the clearest terms both the truth of God's sovereignty and the fact of man's free will. It is by God's divine decision that the way of salvation has been given to man. And it is in his sovereignty that he has ordained faith in Christ to be the *only* way that he will show mercy on mankind. In his sovereignty, God has declared in Acts 2:21:

"...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."