

Romans 9:1-10:4

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Mt 23:27)

1. After introducing the topic of the rejection of Jesus by his contemporary Jews (1-5) Paul tackles his first question, whether “the word of God had failed”. What “word” is he thinking of?
2. To demonstrate that “not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (6) Paul does what any good rabbi would and points to examples from Israel’s history, specifically Abraham’s and Isaac’s sons. Isaac and Ishmael are easy—God chose one, not the other. But with Esau and Jacob we read ‘Even *before they had been born* or had done anything good or bad (so that God’s purpose of election might continue, *not by works but by his call*) she was told, “The elder shall serve the younger.”’ Now we know, as Stott says,

...that Esau forfeited his birthright because of his own worldliness and lost his rightful blessing because of his brother’s deceit, so that human responsibility was interwoven with divine sovereignty in their story. We should also recall that the rejected brothers, Ishmael and Esau, were both circumcised, and therefore in some sense they too were members of God’s covenant, and were both promised lesser blessings. Nevertheless, both stories illustrate the same key truth of ‘God’s purpose according to election.’ [*Romans*, IVP, 268]

Read Gen 25:22-23. How do these stories (9:6-12) illustrate Paul’s points that “not all Israelites truly belong to Israel”? What key truth of “God’s purpose of election” do they illustrate? (Remember the erroneous views of *why* they Israel was elected.) What does Gen 25 indicate was decided prior to Jacob and Esau’s birth? (We’ll get to v. 13 next.)

3. Paul finishes his argument with a quotation from Malachi, written over 1,000 years after Jacob and Esau were born. Listen to the lecture snippet by Doug Stuart¹ (Gordon Conwell, coauthor of *How to Read the Bible*). What does Paul intend by this quotation?
4. The next question Paul addresses is whether God was unjust in not electing the bulk of the Jews. He responds with a quotation from Exodus, shortly after the golden calf. Read Ex 33:4-6, 12-20. What is “mercy” in this story? Who is experiencing God’s favor? How does *this* relate to the Jews of Paul’s day?
5. Paul refers to God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Ex 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8) that his “name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (17). Read Hebrews 3:7-4:2, which warns of the same problem that Paul diagnoses in his fellow Jews. No fewer than three times previously Exodus records that Pharaoh

¹ From his mini-lecture, “The Law: Numerical Parallelisms” (<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/law-numerical-parallelisms/old-testament-survey>).

hardened *his own* heart (8:15, 32; 9:34). As Leon Morris points out, Scripture nowhere refers to God hardening anyone who had not first hardened himself (Stott, 269).

The Jews in the desert, not trusting in God to protect them in the promised land, quickly descended into self-deception, to the point of actually reminiscing about their life in slavery in Egypt.² There are times when God also wants to give us spiritual blessings but we cannot receive them except by choosing to actively trust in his word and promises. And the longer we stay in the “desert” of mistrust, the harder our hearts become, and the more we risk self-deception.

To cultivate a soft heart before God we may want to regularly ask ourselves these questions: What is God calling me to do? What has God promised me in reference to what he is calling me to do? Have I ever regretted following God’s voice before? How will I respond?³

6. Paul, diatribe-style, responds to a presumed objection using the famous potter-and-clay metaphor. Read Isaiah 29:13-16 and Jer 18:1-11. In each passage, what is Israel accused of? Do they have any recourse? How does *this* fit into Paul’s argument in Romans? (See also 2 Tim 2:20-22.)
7. Paul’s heart aches for his Jewish brothers and sisters who have turned aside from their promised Messiah. Who in your life brings you the same sorrow?
8. How might Paul’s Damascus-road experience have affected his view of Israel’s rejection of their Messiah?
9. Stott writes about this passage, “Many mysteries surround the doctrine of election, and theologians are unwise to systematize it in such a way that no puzzles, enigmas or loose ends are left” (268). What loose ends, if any, do you see?

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Fun fact: Romans 9:16, translated in the NRSV “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy”, translated literally reads, **it depends not on human wishing or running** but on God’s mercy.”

Fun quote: “As to ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,’ a woman once said to Mr. Spurgeon, ‘I cannot understand why God should say that He hated Esau.’ ‘That,’ Spurgeon replied, ‘is not my difficulty, madam. My trouble is to understand how God could love Jacob!’” [Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse*, 364.]

² Paul concludes 9 saying the Jews had put their trust in the wrong place, and that was their downfall. They trusted in the law (and their cultural boundary markers). They repeated the error of the Jews condemned by Isaiah (8:14 28:16) and “stumbled”.

³ From Gary DeLashmutt’s teaching, “The Hardened Heart” (<http://www.xenos.org/teachings/?teaching=556>).

Leader's Notes:

This chapter is a flashpoint for the Arminian-Calvinist debate, as the centerpiece of the Calvinist doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. As such it is often read out of context, as a treatise on soteriology. To let it speak for itself we must set aside Reformation debates and first and foremost let it speak for itself, in its own historical context, and in the setting of the letter as a whole. Certainly, we can't enter this study with the view that the text must at the end of the day be consistent with a particular soteriology.

I am convinced 3 things (at least) are crucial to reading this chapter:

1. **Israel's "election" is a national election**--i.e., God chose them as a people. So the aim here isn't to explain individual salvation or damnation. It's to address why Israel, bearer of all the ethnic promises and blessings, hasn't shown up to the welcoming party for their very own king. There are various reasons to believe this (e.g. the prophecy Paul quotes says the older shall serve the younger, but Esau never served Jacob, so they are stand-ins for their lineage, Israel and Edom, as the full passage he quotes from Malachi makes clear). Anyway, the end of ch 9 and the start of ch 11 make it clear he's talking about "his people" (11:1).

2. **Paul** is addressing a Jewish reader, but in the back of his mind he knows most of the readers are Gentiles. He is **heading off the antisemitism** which could easily arise among Gentiles who note that Jews are wrapped up in their cultural markers and have returned Jesus' invitation and call with hostility. So when Paul says Esau was rejected not because of anything he did or even because of any decision he made, **he's exonerating Israel**, at least to some degree.

3. **It's tempting to see v. 16**, "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy", **as a statement about unconditional election** and irresistible grace--God saves whomever he wants independent of even their choice for or against him. But **in vv. 31-32 Paul places the blame on Israel's choice**: "they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works". If this were a statement about unconditional election they would have failed on the basis of God's choice, not theirs. Furthermore, this is only temporary; God is hardening Jewish hearts to allow the Gentiles to come in, as ch. 11 shows. Oh, and in ch 10 Paul calls on the reader to share the good news with Jews (10:10-14). He wouldn't say this if their acceptance or rejection of the Gospel were out of their hands.

What does this mean for individuals? Isn't Israel a collection of individuals?

First, it must be noted that nowhere in scripture does **God "harden" the heart of anyone who hasn't already hardened his own heart**. So God is not making up anyone's mind for him.

Second, as Paul points out in 9:27, **he's saved a remnant**, his pattern throughout the history of Israel.

Third, our belief is that **God will always allow individuals to choose him, and be part of that remnant**. This is made clear in one of the "potter and clay" passages which Paul maybe referring to in 9:21-22, namely, Jeremiah 18, where God says, "but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it". Interpreters often point to two other potter & clay passages from Isaiah but they just say, "don't question God"; Jeremiah actually addresses disobedience.

However we read 9-11 must see it as fitting in with the scheme of the letter as a whole. So far in Romans Paul has said two main things (30,000 ft. view):

1. **true salvation comes from saying "yes" to God's plan**--the way Abraham did when God commanded circumcision, required sacrifice of Isaac, promised him progeny, etc.; and now God's plan in Jesus. Saying "yes" to Jesus is the true "faith" which saves

2. **true righteousness comes** not from obeying a legal system but **by presenting ourselves to God as alive in Christ and opening ourselves up to the work of the Spirit**

So to make Romans 9 say, in effect, "real salvation has nothing to do with your yes or no, and real righteousness follows inevitably from God's yes, whether you like it or not" turns Romans 1-8 on its head. Furthermore, that reading doesn't speak in any way to the context of tensions between Jews and Gentiles in Rome.

Finally, **the whole chapter is surely influenced by Paul's Damascus-road experience**. He was pursuing righteousness through the law and it made him a violent murderer rather than a righteous man. In fact, short of God's intervention he was heading straight to hell. God intervened. Paul must alternate between wanting to rescue all the other Jews (and being frustrated when they don't respond), and wondering why God allows the rest of the lemmings to charge off the cliff. Surely this section is much of his thinking on that. God *did* send Paul the gospel—remember he heard Stephen's speech in person. And when he rejected it God interrupted his trip to Damascus and turned his life around. Paul's devotedly delivered the message to his fellow Jews. At some point he has to recognize that they made their choice; they decided to pursue righteousness by the Law rather than recognizing that ultimately when God's boat leaves shore you'd better be on, whether it fits with tradition or not.

So, what do we say as an introduction to this material?

First, we put it in the context of the letter. Repeating from above, Paul has given two central messages so far:

1. **true salvation comes from saying "yes" to God's plan**--the way Abraham did when God commanded circumcision, required sacrifice of Isaac, promised him progeny, etc.; and now God's plan in Jesus. Saying "yes" to Jesus is the true "faith" which saves
2. **true righteousness comes** not from obeying a legal system but **by presenting ourselves to God as alive in Christ and opening ourselves up to the work of the Spirit**

Paul has just finished a climactic passage about God's victory over sin through the power of the Spirit. And remember he's writing to a divided church of Jews and Gentiles. So he turns to some very hard and relevant questions which the groups must have been asking:

GENTILES: We are reading this Jewish book and following a Jewish Messiah. So why aren't the Jews also doing that? Are we wrong or do they have rocks in their heads? (You can imagine the anti-Semitism creeping in here.)

CHRISTIAN JEWS: Why did God let this happen? Doesn't God have a covenant with us? How can this be part of his plan? They may also have wondered about the teachings of the rabbis that Israel was chosen because of the righteousness of Abraham and the patriarchs.

There was a long period during which commentators tended to see this section as an interruption or digression. Paul was on a roll and got distracted thinking about his cousins, and wanders off a bit before he remembers what he was doing. That view was more popular when Romans was read primarily as a treatise on salvation, rather than a letter written to a church with real problems and issues. Realizing the church had Gentile-Jewish tensions makes sense of this passage. It's not a digression, but a culmination. For 8 chapters Paul's put Jews and Gentiles on even footing. Now he'd better address what the bulk of the Jews were doing in rejecting Jesus.

There's one other point which complicates this passage. It's got to be mentioned that it's a central gem in the crown of Calvinism and is used to demonstrate unconditional election and irresistible grace. That's because it's read as speaking about individual salvation. Now the Jews of Paul's day are special in an important way: they as a nation were chosen by God for his purposes. Many OT passages quoted here reflect that history. But in addition to that special role, they had to choose whether to follow Jesus. Virtually as a nation they rejected Jesus. And to reject Jesus, as Paul's made clear, is to reject salvation. So when Paul talks about the fate of his fellow Jews both their special role in God's plans and their salvation are tied together. We'll see in chapter 11 that he unties them a little, but for tonight this is something to keep in the back of your mind.

So our goal here is not to read this as a theological treatise. We aren't writing a seminary paper. We are reading a letter to a real church with real issues. And we are going to exegete it the way we would any other passage, trying to understand how it fits into the flow of the letter and how its internal logic works.

Summary:

One could summarize Paul's argument in 9 as follows: Why have the Jews missed out on the promised Messiah? Does this mean God's promise to Abraham and his covenant with them failed? No—the true people of Israel are not the physical descendants of Abraham, any more than Ishmael or Esau were.

Furthermore, when God chooses a people to work through he doesn't do it based on their virtues or even their choices, but for his own reasons; so Isaac was the result of a promise, and was chosen, and Jacob was the younger, and God like the use the weaker, younger, disadvantaged, etc.

Okay, but isn't that unfair? Didn't God promise the Jews? No, he can use for his special purposes whomever he desires. And sometimes he uses people as *counter examples*, as he did with Pharaoh, whose heart he hardened so he could reveal his glory.

Well, if that's the case, why blame the Jews? Answer: God chooses who to use for special purposes, but be aware, there may be time for repentance (see Jer 18)! What's more, this may seem like a miscarriage of God's will and covenant, but God was *always* using a remnant for his purposes.

The bottom line is, the Gentiles are in because they strove for righteousness through faith, and the Jews are out because they sought it through the law (i.e., through their cultural boundary markers and legalism). And God knew from the start this would happen.