



But What about Israel?

Lesson 12 | Romans 9:1-29

Teacher's Note: *The details of this passage are challenging. This chapter has been battleground zero for Calvinists and Arminians as they wrestle through the question of what exactly God's election means. While these are important debates worth having, the focus of this study will be on the major point Paul is trying to make – God is just in His dealings with Israel and His Word has not failed. We will need to touch on some of these issues briefly because Paul does talk about election. But we want to avoid losing sight of the big picture by getting lost in the weeds. Both Calvinist and Arminian viewpoints will be presented, along with a brief evaluation of both sides. If you would like to have some brief discussion on these issues, make sure that such discussions don't dominate the group. If you would rather skip over some of that material feel free to briefly skim over it or simply read the lesson material.*

What Paul has argued so far is shocking. God is for you! (Romans 8:31) Not only is He for you, God is so for you that He sacrificed His own Son, sent His Spirit, and has adopted you and made you a coheir with Christ Himself! A day is coming when Christ will return and set up His kingdom, reversing the curse, and on that day you will rule with Him. Things might be hard now, but it will all be worth it. That sounds too good to be true, and there are some who might argue it is. All throughout Romans, Paul has been responding to the skeptics and cynics who doubt that the gospel he preached could really be true. But there is one more objection he knows needs to be tackled, and it's a big one. In fact, you could argue it is the objection. "Hey Paul, what about Israel? Those promises sound pretty good, but God made impressive promises before, to Israel. Yet they are rejecting Him, and all those promises are being fulfilled among the Gentiles, and God's chosen people are not so chosen anymore. So, if God's promises to Israel failed, how can I trust Him when He gives me promises?"

Why do you think this question has probably never occurred to most modern believers?

How would you respond to this objection to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Paul has three goals in Romans 9-11. First, he wants to prove that God's dealings with Israel are just. The way God has treated Israel is fair, and accusations that God has somehow treated Israel in a fickle manner are totally baseless. But second, Paul wants to show that this surprising twist – the nations have received what was originally promised to Israel – was actually predicted by Scripture. The highest concentration of Old Testament citations in all of Paul (and all the New Testament) occur in these three chapters because here Paul shows that God is doing exactly what He said He would in Scripture. Finally, He wants to show that God still has a plan for Israel. All the promises given to Israel will be fulfilled. The next few lessons will

cover Romans 9-11 and will be challenging. Part of the challenge is that this is a question we don't think about too much anymore. Few modern believers have lost sleep wondering how God is going to fulfill His promises to Israel. This is partly because most of us haven't grown up Jewish, and partly because Paul answers these questions in this chapter. The other reason this section is challenging is because Paul's theology in this section is quite deep. Yet even though this is deep theology, all of it is headed to awe-filled worship (Romans 11:33-36) as well as practical living (Romans 12:1).

What value is there in studying deep theology?

Why do you think studying challenging theology is unappealing to many?

The Problem of Israel's Rejection (9:1-6)

Paul's Personal Problem with Israel's Rejection (9:1-3)

Paul begins by sharing his burden for those who are fellow Israelites. His heart for his national brothers is seen most clearly when he states: "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). "Accursed" here means being cut off from Christ. Paul was just about willing to go to hell for the sake of his fellow Israelites he was so burdened for them.

Why do you think Paul was so burdened for Israel? How can we have a similar love for the people around us who don't know Christ?

Paul's Theological Problem with Israel's Rejection (9:4-6)

But for Jews like Paul who accepted or were considering the gospel, Israel's destiny was more than just a sad reality. It was also a huge theological problem. Paul makes a list of blessings that he has just been describing throughout Romans 5-8: adoption, glory, covenants, law, promises. But these things were supposed to be Israel's. God made promises to Israel, yet now Israel didn't seem to be participating in the fulfillment of those promises. That raises the question Paul responds to in 9:6 "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect." Another way that verse could be translated is "But it is not as if the word of God has failed." So how exactly does the Old Testament, filled with promises of glory *for Israel*, fit with the present reality that *Israel* has rejected Christ?

What reasons could you give right now for why God chose to bring the gospel to the Gentiles rather than Israel?

To answer this objection, Paul will make several arguments: (1) physical descent doesn't guarantee spiritual belonging (9:6-13) (2) God's dealings with Israel are fair (9:14-29) (3) Israel is responsible for their rejection of the gospel (9:30-10:21) (4) God is working through a remnant (11:1-10) and (5) God has a plan for Israel's future (11:11-32). We will look at the first two in this lesson and cover the rest in future lessons.

Physical Descent Doesn't Guarantee Spiritual Belonging (9:6-13)

As Paul begins addressing wrong thinking about Israel, the first point he makes is that having Israelite parents doesn't automatically make you a genuine part of God's people. Paul puts it this way "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel." What does Paul mean? How can someone be a part of Israel but not really be an Israelite? Paul means that simply having the right ancestry doesn't make you part of God's people. He then gives two examples to illustrate this point.

God chose Isaac, not Ishmael (9:7-9)

The Jews were very proud that they descended from Abraham. In one of their arguments with Jesus they used this fact to refute the Lord (John 8:33, 39). Yet Paul reminds his readers that not all sons of Abraham received the promise. God was very specific – Isaac was the offspring through which the promises came, not Ishmael. This means that salvation isn't simply a matter of heritage. Being a son of Abraham wasn't enough to guarantee that one was truly a child of God because Abraham had at least one son who didn't inherit the promises God had made. The Jews, like many today, had a tendency to think that their heritage should mean that they automatically were a part of God's people.

In what ways can we have an unhealthy and blinding pride about our heritage?

God chose Jacob, not Esau (9:10-13)

God's choice is not based on who your parents are, rather His choice is also not based on what you do. You can't be good enough for God to choose you. In this second example, Paul points out that God chose Jacob, not Esau, and He made the choice before either of them were born and had done anything good or bad. In other words, God didn't choose Jacob because Jacob was a better guy. Jacob hadn't done anything yet to prove himself. This was part of the problem with Israel, as we will see later (9:30-33): Israel tried to be good enough for God to save them by keeping the law they had been given.

Why do you think Israel made this mistake?

Why do many people today still try to be good enough for God to save them?

God's Is Right in His Dealings with Israel (9:14-29)

Paul has made the case Israel can't assume that simply because they are ethnic Jews they are owed the promises God made to the patriarchs. He's shown that working hard isn't enough to earn salvation. Now he argues that God is fair in the way He has dealt with Israel.

God has the right to choose whom He will show mercy to (14-18)

Paul opens with a rhetorical question he knows many will be asking: Is God being unrighteous? His answer is an emphatic "No!" but what exactly he means by this question and how he argues against it have been hotly debated by Christian theologians. Calvinists¹ have tended to see Paul's question as asking "Is God unrighteous to pick and choose who gets salvation?" Arminians understand Paul as asking "Is God unrighteous because He hasn't show mercy to the nation of Israel?" Calvinists see election – God's choice – as being about individuals, whereas Arminians see election as focused on groups (Israel versus those who are in Christ).²

¹ I am using the term "Calvinist" as a general category for people who believe Paul's focus is on individual election, and "Arminian" for those who think that Paul is talking about the election of groups (Israel versus those in Christ). There is a lot of variety in within each position, and some people may not like me tying their position to a particular individual. Yet these terms are well-known and are the easiest to distinguish these two groups.

² For a detailed debate between an Arminian and a Calvinist, see the articles by Brian Abasciano (Arminian) and Thomas Schreiner (Calvinist) in the *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society*, volume 49 issue 2. These are written on an academic level but give a helpful summary of the exegetical issues being debated by both sides.

Abasciano: https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-2/JETS_49-2_351-371_Abasciano.pdf

Schreiner: https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-2/JETS_49-2_373-386_Schreiner.pdf

Arminians will argue that God's election in the Old Testament normally focuses on Israel as a group, that now He has chosen to claim as His people all who have faith in Christ, and that anyone who shows faith in Christ is a part of the *group* that God has chosen. For them, election is not a matter of God picking and choosing who will get saved, but of sovereignly choosing the people who will get salvation – all those who come by faith in Christ. They emphasize context of this passage to understand these verses. Paul is addressing the problem of Israel as a whole rejecting the gospel, and at the end of the chapter Paul explains the reason they failed to obtain the promises was because *they* didn't believe (9:30-33).

Calvinists think the main objection against God's righteousness is the fact He would choose some individuals to salvation but not choose all. They point out that while God's choice is often a choice of groups, both the New Testament and the Old Testament show God also chooses individuals, even in Romans 9 (Isaac, Jacob).³ While seeking to understand these verses in context, Calvinists will argue that the key to understanding this passage is to look carefully at the words of the verses themselves. For example, in Greek the pronoun "who" is singular, and God's dealings with Isaac, Jacob, and Ishmael, and Pharaoh shows that principles are being drawn from God's dealing with individuals. Finally, Calvinists will argue that for God to choose all those who respond in faith essentially means God chooses those who choose Him, which would make his use of the word "choose" odd.

In either case, Paul is making the point that God has the sovereign right to choose who gets shown His mercy. He has shown mercy to whom He wants, and He has the right to do that because He is God. The fact that God shows mercy at all should humble us, not upset us because we think we or some other group deserve God's mercy.

Why do we sometimes think we are owed God's mercy? What wrong thinking about God and ourselves is demonstrated by such thinking?

God has the right to condemn those who reject Him (19-23)

God has the right to show mercy to whomever He wants, and He has the right to not show that same mercy to everybody. But if God is the one who chooses, how can He hold responsible those who reject Him? After all, if God hardened Pharaoh, how can He hold Pharaoh accountable? Paul's answer is that God is God, and God has the right to harden whomever He wants. It's important to remember while God did harden Pharaoh's heart, at times Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34). It's not as if Pharaoh was trying to reach out to God and God pushed him away. God, as our great Creator, has the right to harden those who reject Him. As difficult as it might be for us to accept, He does this in order that He might show His glory more clearly in the mercy He shows to His people.

How does God's judgment on those worthy of wrath increase our understanding of the mercy shown to us?

How should the doctrine of God's hardening be a warning?

³ Arminians will argue that these individuals are corporate (or group) heads, and as such they represent groups and are not merely individuals. Calvinists will counter that while it is true that Isaac and Jacob in particular represent Israel, they are still individuals.

God has been consistent with His Word (9:24-29)

But did God change His mind? After all, if He made all these promises to Israel, and now they are being fulfilled to the Gentiles, has God gone back on His Word? Paul strings together several passages from the Old Testament to all make the same point: God's working with the Gentiles might be unexpected, but it is consistent with His work in the Old Testament.

The first point Paul makes is that God has the sovereign right to make someone who is not a part of His people become part of His people. He quotes Hosea 2:23, where God tells the northern kingdom of Israel that after disowning them He will make them His people again. This doesn't mean that Gentiles are the new Israel, but rather it establishes the fact that God has the right to choose a new group to be His people. If He could do it for the northern kingdom, He could do it for the Gentiles as a whole.

But not only can God choose the Gentiles if He wants, Israel has frequently been the object of God's righteous anger. Paul shares two other passages from Isaiah (10:22-23 and 1:9) to make the point that Israel had already been decimated to almost no longer existing by God because of their rebellion. This means the small number of Jews that were accepting the gospel is more consistent with Israel's history than the typical Jew would care to admit.

What should the dual realities of God's grace to bring in the Gentiles and His firmness with His own people's sin teach us today about His character?

So has God's Word to Israel failed? No, for at least two reasons. First, being an ethnic Jew doesn't make someone part of God's family, and Paul showed from Scripture that it never has. Second, God's dealings are fair since He is our Creator and He has acted consistently with His previous work in Scripture. Paul will continue to show how God has been faithful to His Word in the following verses, but at this point it's worth pausing to wonder at God's goodness and grace. That God would show mercy to anyone should awe us, yet we so often think we deserve more. Especially for those of us who are Gentiles, God's mercy should humble us and fill us with gratitude that God would be so good to us.