

Romans 9: Has God rejected Israel?

In Romans 9 to 11 Paul deals with the great problem of the rejection of the Messiah by the majority of the nation of Israel, and God's apparent 'rejection' of them. Two questions arise: (a) Has God broken his promises? and (b) If not, how will they be fulfilled? Paul addresses the first question in Chapters 9 and 10, and deals with the second question in Chapter 11.

The 'Israel problem' raises some more disturbing questions: What does it mean that Israel has 'missed her Messiah'? What does this say about God? What does it say about Israel? And what does it say about us, and our own spiritual position?

How can we be secure in God's love and salvation, when Israel was once loved and saved, but now seems to be rejected? Will God also reject us one day? Or to put it another way – if God cannot bring his ancient people, the Jews, to salvation, how can Christians be sure that God will save them?

Paul's heart for Israel (Romans 9 v 1 to 5)

- Romans 8 was full of triumphant joy. How then can Paul speak of having "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart (v 2)? What made him sorrowful?
- The Jews were God's own special people – what privileges had God given them (v 4, 5)?
- Consider Israel's legacy – Christ himself was a Jew, and had declared that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4 v 22). This makes Israel's unbelief all the more problematic...

Paul's intense love is dramatically expressed in v 3: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers". Paul is saying in effect that he is willing to be separated from Jesus, if that could somehow accomplish Israel's salvation. Here Paul reflects the heart of Moses (see Exodus 32 v 31, 32), but supremely he also reflects the heart of Jesus, who was willing to be cursed for others that they might be saved (Galatians 3 v 13)...

Remember Jesus' words "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15 v 13), and remember too that Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem even though he was warned that persecution and imprisonment awaited him there (Acts 20 v 22, 23). And bear in mind that the Jews were not really Paul's 'friends' – they were his worst enemies! They had harassed and persecuted him from town to town, stirring up lies and violence against him – yet he loved them this passionately!

God's sovereign choice (Romans 9 v 6 to 29)

"Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (v 6, 7) – this is like saying that not all who call themselves Christians are truly followers of Christ. See also Matthew 3 v 8, 9 and John 8 v 31 to 59.

- In v 9 to 13 the question Paul is addressing is: 'If God rejects those Jews who have rejected Jesus as Messiah, hasn't his word failed? Weren't the "promises" (v 4) made to Israelites?' How does Paul answer this question? What principles of God's sovereign choice does Paul find in the Old Testament stories of the births of (a) Isaac and (b) Jacob and Esau?

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- In v 14 to 29 how does Paul show that God retains his sovereignty of choice (a) without compromising his righteousness; and (b) without giving anyone just grounds for complaint?
- Note how Paul emphasises God's *mercy* (v 15, 16, 23 to 26). Remember, 'grace' is getting what we don't deserve (e.g. forgiveness and salvation), but 'mercy' is not getting what we do deserve (i.e. God's judgment). God is never less than fair with anyone, but reserves the right to be *more than fair* with people as he chooses, e.g. the Gentiles (v 24) and a "remnant" of the sons of Israel (v 27).
- What is the purpose of God's sovereign choice, and how do the scriptures that Paul quotes illustrate that purpose? See Hosea 2 v 23, Hosea 1 v 10, Isaiah 10 v 22, 23, Isaiah 1 v 9.

Israel's unbelief (Romans 9 v 30 to 33)

- What two ways of seeking acceptance with God are contrasted here?

Note that Paul has already shown in the earlier chapters of his letter to the Romans that the only possible way to be saved is through faith, not through works of the law; and that this salvation comes only through the work of a crucified Saviour – which was a stumbling block to Israel.

Conclusion

Verse 19 poses a key question: 'If it's all a matter of God's sovereign choice, how can God still find fault with us? How can anyone go against God's will?' Yet God says we are responsible for our beliefs and behaviour, and thus for our eternal destiny. This is the heart of a great mystery! God's sovereign choice does not relieve man of his responsibility – who are we to question God? After all, he is the potter, we are clay...

It may be helpful to consider three issues raised in this chapter:

1. Who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Carefully read through Exodus 7 to 12, and compare Pharaoh's attitude during the earlier plagues with Pharaoh's destiny during the later plagues.
2. Consider the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (v 22) – we should not think that God prepared them so; those vessels did an adequate job on their own!
3. Read verses 30 to 33 again. Israel *chose* not to pursue righteousness by faith, but instead by works of the law. But God *chose* to show mercy to the Gentiles (v 24), and to a "remnant" of the "sons of Israel" (v 27)...

Prayer – O Lord, we come with fear and trembling, when we consider your special people the Jews, and how the majority have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Help us to understand your purposes, and help us like Paul to love and pray for the people of Israel. We thank you, Lord, that you are a God of grace, and that by grace we have been saved through faith. We praise you too that you are a God of mercy, and that through your mercy many are saved, both Jews and Gentiles.

Help us never to take your grace and mercy for granted, but to remember always that Jesus chose to die for our sins upon the cross, and that we can enjoy the blessings of forgiveness and acceptance and salvation because of his finished work!

We praise you, Lord! Amen.