

A. The Plight of Israel (9:1-5)

Paul's entrance into this new section of his epistle appears at first glance to be both abrupt and disconnected. In chapter eight he brought his argument regarding the believer's gospel hope to its pinnacle, declaring its sureness on the basis of God's unfailing love in Christ. And then, without introduction or explanation, Paul immediately shifted to an intimate personal confession pertaining to his burden for his Jewish brethren. The abruptness of his transition may catch contemporary readers off guard, but there is a very real and important connection between chapters 1-8 and this new focus on Israel.

- The first eight chapters of the epistle present Paul's gospel of justification by faith alone.
- In them he has shown how this gospel pertains equally to Jew and Gentile; the Law of Moses is of no benefit to men in their quest for righteousness before God (2:1-4:25).
- It is this gospel of justification by faith in Christ that brings a confident and invincible hope to sinners. Justified sinners have a hope before God that cannot disappoint for the simple reason that their righteousness does not in any way depend upon them. Their righteousness is God's alone, secured for them by Christ and applied and sealed to them by His Spirit.
- If this gospel righteousness pertains to Jews as well as Gentiles, and Israel as a whole has rejected the gospel, then what does this mean for God's covenant nation and His promises to them? God had established Israel as His unique people by covenant (Exodus 19:1-24:8; Deuteronomy 4:32-40, 7:1-11; etc.), and now He had apparently rejected them and established a new relationship with *Gentiles* on the basis of faith in Christ.
- It is true that Israel had been unfaithful to God and repeatedly broken His covenant with them, and for that reason He had driven them into exile and subjugation (cf. Deuteronomy 6:1-25, 28:1-29:29; 2 Kings 18:9-12; 2 Chronicles 36:1-21). But God had also restored a remnant from their captivity as evidence for the surety of His ongoing promise that the day was coming when He would cleanse, forgive, recover, and establish His people forever. Indeed, hadn't God promised to Israel a glorious, everlasting kingdom from the time He chose Abraham and entered into covenant with him (Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 17:1-19; cf. also Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 36:1-37:28; Hosea 1:1-3:5; Zephaniah 3:1-19; Zechariah 12:1-13:9; etc.)?
- In view of His historical and repeated promise to His covenant people Israel, how is God's rejection of the nation to be understood? What does this say about His integrity as a covenant-keeping and promise-keeping God?

These considerations were doubtless in Paul's mind as he raised the issue of Israel to the Romans. Beyond that, Paul understood that God's relationship with Israel implicated Gentile Christians, for it affected how they viewed themselves in relation to their Hebrew brethren. He was aware that God's apparent rejection of Israel and embrace of the Gentiles would tend to produce in them a sense of pride and superiority; the very things the gospel precluded.

1. But Israel's unbelief was not to provoke scorn or arrogance in the largely Gentile Church. Such a posture betrays a lack of discernment with respect to how a man – Jew or Gentile – enters into and continues in relationship with God. The gospel is entirely a matter of grace, and therefore leaves no place for pride. Paul understood as well as anyone the fierceness and violence of Jewish rejection of the gospel; he had experienced it firsthand in a most agonizing way. If there was ever a person who had a right to repudiate and scorn the Jews, it was Paul. Nevertheless, he was deeply burdened for them; his posture was one of sincere sorrow, compassion, and urgency for their salvation:

“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ, for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh...” (9:1-3)

- a. As a preamble to the articulation of his burden, Paul insisted upon and emphasized its **sincerity** by means of two parallel statements. In each he asserted his truthfulness – first positively and then negatively – and then reinforced it by drawing upon his union with Christ. His words of concern would be uttered as one who is “in Christ,” and this union gave him confidence that his own good conscience regarding his convictions was not a matter of self-deception: the witness of his conscience was under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

By this introduction Paul made evident his concern that the Romans understand and acknowledge his profound burden for the sons of Israel. Perhaps he felt that his letter to this point had implied a disdain for the Jews because of their rejection of Christ, or a disinterest in their plight because of his apostolic mandate to evangelize the Gentiles (ref. 1:1-7, 2:1-29, 11:13). More likely, he was painfully aware of the reputation he had gained among the Jewish people because of His preaching of the gospel. Everywhere Paul went he was accused of speaking against the Law of Moses and the Jewish people (Acts 21:17-28, 24:1-6, 25:1-8, etc.). Because he preached righteousness and relationship with God by faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Jews regarded him as seeking to overthrow Judaism. No doubt his widespread and notorious reputation had extended as far as Rome.

- b. Having insisted upon the sincerity of his burden, Paul disclosed its **substance**. Far from being insensitive or indifferent to Israel's unbelief – let alone rejoicing in it as one who had willingly betrayed his own people – Paul was deeply and perpetually grieved over it; the Jews' terrible condition provoked “great sorrow and unceasing grief in his heart.” This concern is evident not simply from Paul's words, but more especially from his gospel ministry. His actions substantiated his claims. For though his apostolic commission had directed him primarily toward the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:1-16, 13:44-48, 22:1-21; also Romans 1:1-7, 11:13; Galatians 1:11-17, 2:1-9; Ephesians 3:1-10; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; etc.), Paul consistently initiated his gospel witness in the communities he visited by preaching in the synagogues. He began his apostolic ministry in this way (Acts 13:1-5, 14-43), and continued to witness to the Jews until the end (Acts 28:16-31).

As much as Paul was burdened for the Gentiles to escape their former darkness and find light and life in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, he was more burdened for the Jews. The reason is that their rejection of the gospel was a greater tragedy than that of the Gentiles. At some level the Gentiles had an excuse for their unbelief, whereas Israel had rejected the very Savior promised to them and in whose deliverance they had placed their hope throughout their generations. The nations had not expected Him, whereas Israel had *missed* Him; they did not recognize the time of their visitation (Luke 19:28-44; cf. Matthew 23:29-39; John 1:1-11).

The tragedy of their failure and Paul's desire for Israel's salvation were so great that there was nothing Paul would not have done to remedy their plight: "*For I could wish myself accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh...*" By this declaration Paul made clear that his burden was for the Jews' reconciliation with God in Christ. Their calamity was that they were separated from Christ, and therefore *accursed*, whatever their delusional confidence gained by their ethnic heritage and possession of the Law. The nation chosen by God and set apart as His beloved people now stood under His sentence of eternal damnation, having spurned Him by rejecting His Son and seeking to destroy His gospel and those who embraced it. The collective response of Israel to Yahweh's promised King proved their own assertion that they recognized no king but the pagan ruler who had subjugated them (John 19:1-16).

Israel stood separated from Christ and accursed, and Paul proclaimed to the Romans that he would exchange places with his kinsmen if it meant their salvation. This insistence has spawned no little controversy, with much of it focusing on the sincerity of Paul's claim. Was he serious or simply making a point? Furthermore, was he indicating that he actually *prayed* in this way as he sought God's mercy upon Israel? Clearly Paul understood that his own salvation could not be forfeited in exchange for another soul. The most natural way to understand his words is that they were intended to bear witness to how much he loved his countrymen, how tragically he viewed their unbelief, and how desperately he sought their salvation. Like Moses before him, Paul's love for Israel made him willing to suffer all things possible in order to secure their benefit and well-being (cf. Exodus 32:1-32, also 33:1-34:9). Again, his words were no idle talk. He insisted that he would willingly sacrifice himself for the sake of his Jewish brethren, and his ministry among them proved out his contention.

2. In 9:1-3 Paul expressed the sincerity and content of his burden, and the subsequent two verses provide insight into the **reason** for it. As noted, Paul's sorrow over Israel's unbelief was especially great because of the unique and privileged position the nation had enjoyed, and here he proceeded to enumerate the central facets of that position:

"...who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."

It was Israel's unique privilege that made Paul's sorrow so immense, and it is that same privilege that forms the framework for all of his argumentation in these three chapters. In this way verses 4-5 provide the necessary foundation for the balance of the larger context.

"...Paul's willingness to sacrifice himself for unbelieving Israel (v.3) arises not only from love for his own people but also from love for the truthfulness of God's word. Paul's concern is not just that so many of his own people seem doomed to hell; it is also that their fate seems incompatible with the many privileges and promises granted to Israel by God in the OT. Thus Paul's listing of Israel's blessings prepares the way for the question that is central to this whole section: Has God's word failed (v. 6a)?" (Moo)

- a. The first aspect of the Jews' privileged position is defining and overarching, namely their status as *Israelites*. All of the other things mentioned can be rightly subsumed under this one reality. For the name "Israel" identified the chosen people descended from Jacob's twelve sons; the people in whom God fulfilled His covenant promise to Abraham and all of the blessings attached to it. And inasmuch as all of the subsequent listed privileges are expressions of what it meant for Israel to be Israel, they are intimately connected to one another as well.
- b. As promised to Abraham, God set apart his descendents to be His unique people among all the nations of the earth. And at the appointed time, He called His elect, beloved son out of Egypt and joined him to Himself (cf. Genesis 15:1-21 with Exodus 3:1-17, 4:21-23, and 6:1-8 with Isaiah 63:7-9; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:1-6, 2:10). Thus to Israel alone belonged the *adoption as sons*.
- c. And as His beloved "son," the nation of Israel had enjoyed a unique relationship with his covenant God and Father. The evidence that God had taken Israel to Himself was His abiding presence among them. Israel's greatest privilege as Yahweh's son was that His glory resided in their midst. The glory of His power secured and attended their deliverance from Egypt, and His glorious presence led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, brought them into covenant relation there, and went with them for forty years until leading them up into the promised land of Canaan (Exodus 16:1-10, 24:1-18, also 23:20-23, 32:30-34; Deuteronomy 4:32-38, 32:8-14; Isaiah 63:7-9; etc.). Being sons of the Most High God, to Israel belonged the divine *glory*.
- d. The sons of Israel enjoyed the privilege of God's glorious presence because of their status as beloved sons. But this status was obtained and preserved for them through the vehicle of God's covenants. Yahweh formally initiated His relationship with Israel through His covenant with Abraham, and the promises attached to that covenant were realized by Abraham's descendents through the vehicle of the Sinai Covenant (Exodus 3-24). In the context of Israel's sinfulness, the Sinai Covenant was itself mediated through the Levitical priestly system and the covenant God made with the Levites and priests (Nehemiah 13:22-29; Malachi 2:1-9). Centuries later God extended the significance of His covenant relation with Israel through his covenant promise to David (2 Samuel 7:1-17).

Israel was uniquely God's *covenant* son, for His relationship with the nation was grounded in and perpetuated through a whole series of interrelated covenant arrangements. This is likely the reason that Paul chose to employ the plural term "covenants," and by doing so he ensured that his readers ascribed proper significance to Israel's covenant privilege. For the centrality of the Sinai Covenant tends to overshadow its counterparts, often to the point that, among contemporary Christians at least, the other covenants are almost not considered at all, and if they are, they are not viewed in proper relation to the Old Covenant. The name "Israel" evokes thoughts of Sinai, but this covenant both presupposed and anticipated other crucial covenant structures that defined Israel and her relation to God. To the Jews belongs the *covenants* and the *giving of the Law*.

- e. God's glory in Israel was His presence in the midst of His people, and He was present among them by virtue of, and in witness to, His covenant union with them. He was their Father-God and they were His sons, and He made tangible His residence among them by placing His glory in His appointed dwelling place, namely the tabernacle and later the Jerusalem temple. Throughout the Old Testament the divine glory is most associated with Yahweh's sacred sanctuary, both with respect to the Israelite form of the kingdom and its future consummated form (cf. Exodus 25:1-8, 40:17-38; 1 Kings 8:10-21; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3; Psalm 26:8, 29:9; also Ezekiel 9:3, 10:4, 18; 43:1-8, 44:1-4).

Though Israel realized that God doesn't literally dwell in a physical structure, He specifically associated His presence among His people with the appointed sanctuary. The reason was that He wanted them to understand that human beings must come to Him and worship Him where He can be found. By localizing His presence in this way, Israel was taught that God is to be worshipped only in connection with His sanctuary – the place of His habitation (cf. John 2:13-22 and 1 Peter 2:4-6). Furthermore, their worship was to be mediated by appointed *sacerdotal* intercessors. Because of Israel's sin, her relationship with God (attested by His glory-presence in His sanctuary) had to be mediated, and that mediation took the form of sacrificial intervention. Israel's priests, and the sacrifices they offered according to divine prescription, were the point of the people's connection with God. But this intercessory provision belonged to Israel alone. No other nation was granted a means for approaching and worshipping the Most High. He was uniquely the Holy One of Israel; theirs was the *temple service*.

- f. All of these privileges belonged exclusively to Israel because of God's promissory pledge. Those promises had their origination in His oath to Eve following her disobedience (Genesis 3:15), and then tracked through history, being given to Noah and Shem and ultimately to Abraham. From there God's promise continued through Isaac and Jacob to the twelve tribes descended from them. Throughout Israel's covenant life, the heart of the promises – whatever their specific content – was the overarching divine pledge of sovereign redemption and all of the blessings of provision and communion that attend it. From its establishment as a peculiar people, Israel was the possessor of the *promises*.

In Verse 9:4 Paul enumerated six distinct blessings expressive of the Jews' privileged status as Israelites. Though listed individually, they are grammatically grouped together with a relative pronoun ("to whom"). In contrast, the final two items in his list are highlighted separately, each being introduced with its own corresponding relative pronoun (9:5). Each of these three pronouns links its referents with the noun *Israelites*: as noted, the first conjoins the six things just discussed, the second identifies the seventh item (the fathers), and the third specifies the eighth (Israel's relation to Christ).

- g. The first of the final two privileges enjoyed by the nation of Israel is its relation to the *fathers*. This completes the previous list in the sense that it, too, is something that Paul says "belongs" to those who are Israelites. The term *fathers* can be taken in the broad sense of referring to one's ancestors in general, but the context, and especially Paul's spotlighting of this matter, point to the conclusion that he had the patriarchs of Israel in mind. That is, by referring to the "fathers" he meant specifically Israel's *covenant* fathers, namely Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

A likely reason for Paul listing this Israelite privilege separately is that it is the foundation of the whole Israelite reality, and is therefore foundational to the previous six privileges by which Paul characterized Israel. Every Jew could claim the distinctive title of *Israelite* only because of his descent from the patriarchs. When God made His covenant with Abraham, He extended it to his descendents (Genesis 17:1-8). The first two covenant descendents were Isaac and Jacob, and then the nation of Israel descended from Jacob's twelve sons. Therefore, descent from the fathers constituted a preeminent Israelite privilege; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was also every Hebrew's God (Exodus 2:23-6:8).

- h. The final privilege enjoyed by Israel is not one of *belonging* but of *begetting*: "*and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh...*" All of the others are related to Israel by the pronominal relation "concerning whom," whereas this one finds its relation to Israel by the expression "out of whom." This Israelite privilege is the most significant for several reasons, but two stand out:
- 1) The other things Paul enumerated have their point of reference in Israel's *origination* and Old Covenant existence. The latter privilege points to Israel's divinely intended *destiny*. This means that Israel itself – along with all the privileges enjoyed by the covenant nation – served a prophetic and preparatory purpose as they anticipated and promised Jesus Christ.
 - 2) The second reason proceeds out of the first. Precisely because Israel finds its destiny in Christ, He stands as the point of Israel's *fulfillment*. He is the reality that Israel portrayed and to which Israel pointed. The implication is that all of the things here listed by Paul – things that uniquely pertained to God's Old Testament people – also find their individual fulfillment in Him. In particular, all of God's **promises** to Israel find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. *This truth is absolutely crucial to Paul's salvation-historical perspective and his argument in the balance of the larger context.*

When the question is raised regarding God's integrity and faithfulness with respect to His Old Covenant people, the answer begins with recognizing the nature, purpose, and destiny of Israel. Only then can God's promises to the nation be understood. And what Paul alludes to in this brief passage is that Israel had its origin in God's covenant promises to Abraham. At the heart of those promises was the fact that through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). *Abraham – through the means of his covenant descendents – was to be God's instrument of universal blessing.* Paul understood this promise to have its primary referent in national Israel. Israel was Yahweh's elect "servant-son-disciple," and therefore was to be the vehicle for His self-revelation and blessing to the surrounding nations. But rather than being God's witness in the earth, Israel aligned herself with the estranged world through her own unbelief and idolatry (cf. Isaiah 41:1-9, 44:1-21 with 42:18-43:28; also 1:1-15, 5:1-23).

As a result, if Abraham's blessing was to come to the world as God promised, it would have to come through *another* descendent of Abraham – another servant-son-disciple who, unlike Israel, would prove faithful to Yahweh in representing and revealing Him to the world of estranged men. And this is precisely what God promised and progressively revealed through His prophets (ref. Isaiah 41-54). This One would accomplish what Israel would not and could not. In this way He was to be the fulfillment of Israel: the Seed of Abraham who would mediate God's blessing of reconciliation to all the families of the earth. This is the reason Paul could affirm that God preached the *gospel* to Abraham (Galatians 3:8).

And so, as Israel had its origin in God's promises to the patriarchs, so it found its destiny in Jesus Christ: *out of Israel came "the Christ according to the flesh."* In listing the core privileges of Israel, Paul ended with this one because it is the one in which all of the others find their own fulfillment and ultimate significance. For each of them serves to identify Old Covenant Israel, and Israel's purpose was to portray and prefigure the true Israel – the true Seed of Abraham; Yahweh's true beloved servant-son-disciple. As Paul enters into his consideration of Israel's present and future place in God's redemptive plan, he begins by establishing a crucial biblical principle, namely that the question of Israel – *as indeed any question that may be raised* – can only be answered by understanding **Christological promise-fulfillment**. Any other approach to any issue whatsoever is necessarily flawed, and so cannot help but yield flawed answers.

The solution to the dilemma of God's rejection of the nation to whom He gave His promises is grounded in discerning Israel's *role* in salvation-history. Israel's origin provides part of that insight, but its destiny fully illumines it. That is, the essence of the solution lies in the relationship between Israel and the Son descended from her. *The One who is the true Israelite is the simple answer to the question of Israel.* He is at the same time the source, substance, and fulfillment of all God's promises. He is the source in that He is "*over all, God blessed forever.*" But He is also the substance of the promises in that they had their focal point in the mediation of God's blessing to the world. And being the substance, He is also the fulfillment of the promise. And so it is that in two brief verses Paul has already answered the issue he has not yet explicitly raised, namely the apparent failure of God's word of promise to Israel (ref. 9:6). The balance of his discussion through the eleventh chapter only serves to unfold the glory of his answer.