

Unbelieving Israel?

Romans 9:1-6a

Salvation flows out of God's eternal love for his elect people. When God chooses an individual, or a people for himself, he then effectually calls them to himself. This calling will result in their repenting of sin and embracing the promises of the covenant. Justification, sanctification, and then glory will result. God's redeeming love results in eternal glory for the objects of his love.

In theory, this sounds wonderful. And, because God's Word tells us that this is true, it is NOT sentimental nonsense. But what are we to think when after declaring his love for a people, that very people rejects his love? Has something separated them from God's love, after all? Can God's elect be lost to eternal damnation? That is the question of the chapters 9-11. Although, today, we will only begin to dip our toe into these deep waters.

The first eight chapters of Romans are one flowing explanation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul moves us from the problem of our sin to the solution in Jesus Christ. We have reached a crescendo and are expecting Paul to take us through the practical lifestyle effects that the Gospel will produce. It is precisely what we find beginning in Romans 12.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers,¹ by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² ² Do not be conformed to this world,¹ but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.²

And the final chapters of Romans deal with things that we would expect in one of Paul's letters.

But Paul doesn't go from the end of Romans 8 to the beginning of Romans 12. Instead, he throws us a curve ball. He takes three whole chapters to discuss his fellow Jews. The question is "Why?"

One reason was that there were some Jewish believers in the largely Gentile church at Rome. Understanding the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Church of Jesus Christ was a huge issue in all of the churches of the First Century.

Another reason was that there were many more Jews in Rome who continued to reject the Gospel, as had occurred wherever Paul had gone.

We cannot forget that most of the persecution that Paul had endured had been instigated by his fellow Jews.

This obstinacy of the Jews to the Gospel of Jesus Christ raised several dilemmas that Paul felt compelled to address before he goes any further. Some of these dilemmas are of more immediate concern to you than others. But as we know from 2 Timothy 3, all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for your growth in the Lord. What are these dilemmas?

First, there is the question of whether or not Paul continues to care about his fellow Jews. Has their hatred of him and his ministry caused him to no longer care about them?

Second, there is the question of whether or not Paul has given up hoping for the salvation of his fellow Jews. Has their obstinacy overcome his expectation of their coming to a living faith in Jesus Christ?

These are the dilemmas that are of a more personal nature for Paul. They are the easiest for us to recognize, because we can relate to the personal feelings of Paul. But they will have application to our context as well, as we will see.

But although Paul's personal feelings towards his fellow Jews are important, I do not believe that is why Paul spends three whole chapters on the topic of his fellow Jews. The unbelief of the Jewish people cuts directly against what Paul has just explained is the very heart of the Gospel: God's sovereign ability to save his chosen people out of his amazing love in Christ Jesus. This is where the rubber meets the road!

The rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, by the majority of Jews, especially their leadership in Jerusalem, presents a question as to whether the Gospel can be trusted. God had made promises to Israel. Their current unbelief called into question whether these promises were legitimate.

In our day, there are many differing ideas as to how we should understand "Israel"?

Are we referring to the piece of land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea?

Are we referring to the present nation of Israel?

Are we referring to the citizens of this present nation?

Are we referring to those who have Jewish ancestry in them? The blood of past Israelites?

Or are we referring to religious Jews, those who have submitted to the covenant sign of circumcision and who seek to keep the Law of Moses? Although these definitions may overlap, Paul must have in mind those who are religious Israelites.

In Romans 3, Paul clearly associates the Jew with one who has received the sign of circumcision.

Romans 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

O. Palmer Robertson, in his book *The Israel of God*, was very helpful in clarifying the meaning of Israel. An individual was never primarily an Israelite because of ethnicity. Abraham was himself a Gentile. It was only the call of God that made him a Patriarch. And, throughout Israel's history, Gentiles could be incorporated into God's people through circumcision.

It was certainly true that the children of Israelites were considered members of Israel. They received the sign of the covenant at 8 days old. But if a parent chose not to circumcise their child, both parent and child were cut off from the people of Israel. If ethnicity was all there was to being an Israelite, this could never have been the case!

So, an Israelite is one who has submitted to circumcision and who seeks to follow the Law of Moses. Paul's Gospel is "first for the Jew and then for the Gentile"

ESV **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Paul did not seek out ethnic Jews with whom to share the gospel. He went into the synagogues and preached the good news of Jesus to those who were "religious Jews."

Read Romans 9:1-6a.

As Paul reflects upon the unbelief of his fellow Israelites, he is filled with sorrow and unceasing anguish!

I am speaking the truth in Christ-
I am not lying;
my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-

2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.
3 For I could wish
that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ
for the sake of my brothers,
my kinsmen
according to the flesh.

Why would Paul have to defend his own sorrow and anguish?
In three ways he defends the truthfulness of his feelings, why?

Because Paul's primary ministry has been to the Gentiles. To a Jew, it would certainly have looked like Paul did not have any ongoing affection towards them. And who could blame Paul? Everywhere Paul went he was met with persecution at the hands of his fellow Israelites. This would be enough to challenge anyone's affections.

Not so, says Paul. The love that he has for his fellow Israelites remains strong. Every day he experiences anguish because they do not believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. If it were possible (which of course it is not), Paul would sever his own relationship with Christ to give them faith. That is how much he loves them.

Moses had a similar attitude in his own day:

Exodus 32:32 ³² But now, if you will forgive their sin - but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."

It must be accepted that these Israelites were presently in danger of eternal condemnation. If this were not true then Paul's words are meaningless.

It is easy to pass over this point and even to forget it as we continue through the following chapters. Paul does not comfort himself in his grief with the thought: These Israelites will still be saved one day, even if they don't ever believe in Jesus. No, Paul believes that unless their heart is changed such that they believe in Jesus, they will suffer an eternity in hell – even as Israelites.

The grief that Paul feels does not flow from unbelief in general. It is a grief that springs from the unbelief of Israelites: those of God's chosen people.

The prophet Jeremiah also felt such grief:

Jeremiah 9:1 ¹ Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!

It is easy to see how some might conclude that Paul is thinking about “ethnic Israel”. After all, he calls them his “kinsmen, according to the flesh.” That sure does sound like ethnicity. Certainly, according to the flesh can mean ethnicity, flesh and blood. But Paul uses this phrase to mean “earthly, human religion” in contrast to “life in the Spirit”. Paul calls these Israelites his kinsmen. But then he must qualify kinsmen with “according to the flesh” because they are not his kinsmen “according to the Spirit.”

Both the Christian and the non-Christian must live life in their physical bodies. But the non-Christian lives “according to the flesh” meaning according to man’s religious effort. Instead, the Christian lives by the Spirit.

Romans 8:12-13 ¹² So then, brothers,¹ we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Paul makes a similar contrast in Galatians 4. When Abraham had a child with Hagar, he did so trusting in his own human effort. But when Sarah bore Abraham a son, it was through the promise and power of God.

Galatians 4:23 ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

So, when Paul says, my kinsmen, “according to the flesh” we should not take him to simply mean flesh and blood. Rather, he is making a distinction between human religion and Spirit produced bonds. Paul feels a special grief towards the Israelites because he has a covenantal bond with them – even if it is a bond “according to the flesh.”

In vv. 4-5, Paul is going to explain the bond that he feels towards his fellow Israelites. He is going to list many of the shared privileges and benefits that he possesses with them.

⁴ They are Israelites,

Now, from our perspective, there is little difference in the name Israelite from the name Jew. We use them interchangeably. But from the biblical perspective, there is a huge difference. We are not really even sure what is the origin of the word Jew. (I know as soon as I say that some of you will Google it and come up after the service and give me the various theories on the word.) But the word Jew does not have theological significance. On the other hand, the name Israelite is full of meaning.

Israel was the name that God gave to Jacob after his night of wrestling with him.

Genesis 32:28 ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,¹ for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

The striving was not striving against God. It was the exertion of faith-filled effort that sought the blessing of the promises from God.

Genesis 32:26 ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

To be an Israelite was not primarily a blood line. It was to be a member of the heritage of Jacob's struggle to receive covenant blessing from God.

To be an Israelite carries meaning and weight – it is about possessing the quality of persevering faith.

This is what it means to be an Israelite in Paul's mind.

and
to them belong
the adoption,

That Paul can make this statement about Israel should grab our attention.

He has just used this same term to refer to the Christian's relationship with God by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:15 ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Paul uses adoption to define the sort of relationship that we as Christians have with God through Jesus Christ. God adopts us into his family. We become his children through faith in Jesus Christ.

What is more, Paul uses adoption to express the final hope of the Christian. We may be adopted as sons now, but on that Final Day, when Jesus returns and we are raised in our new bodies, there will be a final consummation of the redemption process. And Paul refers to this as "our adoption as sons."

Romans 8:23-24 ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?

And, when Paul looks back to the very beginnings of our redemption in the heart of God, he also speaks in terms of adoption. Predestination is connected with adoption in the heart of God.

Ephesians 1:4-5 In love ⁵ he predestined us¹ for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

So, if you are considering the eternal love of God to save you, adoption is the word used. If you are considering the present relationship with God, do so in light of adoption. And if you are considering your final hope as a Christian, adoption is how God wants you to dream.

Adoption is at the very core of our Christian identity. Most of us know what adoption means, but it is always good to hear the definition again for clarity.

ui`oqesi,a, aj f: to formally and legally declare that someone who is not one's own child is henceforth to be treated and cared for as one's own child, including complete rights of inheritance (Louw-Nida)

When you put it in these terms, it is truly striking that Paul says of the Israelites

to them belong
the adoption,

Literally it reads: whose *is* the adoption

So, at a minimum, on the word level, Paul is saying of the Israelites the same thing that he is saying of us as believers in Jesus Christ. I know that we want to immediately explain why the adoption of Israel is NOT like our adoption as Christians. And, there will be a time for us to make this distinction. But, I believe we jump so quickly to the distinctions that we never even really grapple with the similarities.

Paul has just expounded to the Roman Christians the glories of their relationship with God in terms of adoption and now he says of the Israelites, “whose is the adoption.”

I want to point out to you that to be adopted one has to NOT be a natural child. If Israel were God’s natural son, then she would not have had to be adopted in the first place. So much for the idea that being a member of Israel is about ethnicity alone.

Is there a specific event to which Paul is referring when he makes this statement? I believe he is referring to Israel’s Exodus from Egypt. This is the time in the Scripture when God begins to speak of his people as his son.

Exodus 4:22-23 ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

Much later, when the Prophet Hosea is looking back upon the history of God’s faithful love to Israel, he begins with the Exodus.

Hosea 11:1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

When the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, their uniqueness as a people is derived from God’s electing love. The word “adoption” is not used, but the idea is certainly there.

ESV **Deuteronomy 7:6** "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

When Israel needs discipline, God reminds her of who He is "to her": her Father.

Deuteronomy 32:6 ⁶ Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

One more important consideration...

When the prophets proclaimed the hope of a Redeemer, a Messiah, they always did so in terms of God's rousing himself to save "Israel" because of his steadfast love to her.

Isaiah 63:15-19 ¹⁵ Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful¹ habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. ¹⁶ For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. ¹⁷ O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. ¹⁸ Your holy people held possession for a little while;¹ our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. ¹⁹ We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.

Isaiah 64:8-9 ⁸ But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.

It is easy for us today to reduce Israel's adoption to the promise of a Messiah, or to a future Promise of Land. I challenge you to not be so hasty. Put yourself in the place of our OT brothers and sisters. Would they have heard these words to them as merely national promises that had little or nothing to say about their individual relationship with God? I do not think so.

God said to the Israelites as a people: You are my son. And he also said to the members of Israel: You are my sons. This is at the very heart of why Paul is so distraught over Israel's current unbelief. Paul is not primarily distraught because he knows the Israelites personally. It is not his personal connection with the unbelieving Jews that bothers him. In fact, he does not name any of them personally. He could have said, "I grew up with "so and so"." Or he could have said, "I remember being in school together with "so and so". We had some great times together."

Paul does not stress the personal connection. Instead, he stresses the Religious and Covenantal Connections. The Israelites are those who have been chosen by God for adoption. They ought to be receiving their Messiah. Instead, they are rejecting Him. O, how terrible this is! Of all people on the face of the planet, they are the ones who ought to be glad Jesus has come. Instead, they continue in rebellion and are cut off from God's love and in danger of eternal hell.

Paul continues with his list of Israel's covenantal blessings: theirs is the glory.
the glory,

By "glory", Paul means the glorious presence of the Holy God with Israel. It is sometimes referred to as God's Shekinah glory.

Pillar of Cloud in the Wilderness

Exodus 16:10 ¹⁰ And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

The cloud that covered Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Law.

Exodus 24:15-18 ¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

The cloud that covered the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34 ³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

This same cloud filled the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

All of these refer to God's visible presence with His people in protection and provision and blessing.

Do not too quickly jump to our own experience of God's presence in the indwelling of the Spirit. Of course it is true that the indwelling Spirit is greater. But, if you were standing at the Red Sea, you would not have thought: That is merely the external and visible presence of God. No big deal. Instead, you would have thought, "The glory of God dwells with us!"

The covenants

When I teach on the covenants, I like to say that a covenant is a relationship with rules. In divine covenants, God sets the rules that define the relationship. Every covenant has both promises and responsibilities. Paul is simply recalling the incredible blessing that Israelites have because they are members of God's covenants with Abraham and Moses and David. In Ephesians, when Paul wants to describe Gentiles before they believed the Gospel, he refers to them as "strangers to the covenants".

Ephesians 2:12 ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Even what we call the New Covenant was promised to the Israelites.

Jeremiah 31:31-33 ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

All of the covenant promises were given to the Israelites.

How is it possible that those who were recipients of the covenants are not experiencing the blessing of those covenants?

The giving of the law

Paul can often refer to the law in a negative way, as a way to gain God's favor through human effort. But that is not how he uses it here. Here the law is a great blessing. God's people could know God's holy will in a way that the rest of the world could not. They remained in darkness. But God's people walked in the light. And, it was the Israelites who through the law could see their desperate need for a Messiah. The law revealed the depth of their sin and pointed them to the need for the Lamb of God who would take away their sins. To have been given the law was a true blessing.

The worship

By worship, Paul is referring to the worship at the Tabernacle and the Temple. We look back and are grateful that we do not have to keep all of the ceremonies of the Levitical system. But we must not miss that in this system, God was providing a means by which God himself could be approached by his people.

Exodus 29:43-45 ⁴³ There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. ⁴⁴ I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. ⁴⁵ I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.

Israelites were given the privilege of coming near to their God in worship.

Israelites were also given...

and

The promises

I spoke of promises in relationship to the covenants. But here Paul singles out promises. God, throughout Israel's history, made promises to her. And he guaranteed those promises with an oath. Paul does not limit these promises. Like the covenants, they embrace all of redemption. In many ways, all of history is the working out of God's promises to those who have forfeited them. It is not that those who are strangers to the covenant cannot embrace the promises for themselves. Of course they can. Rahab and

Ruth are great examples of this very thing. But the promises belong to God's covenant people. This is why Peter, as he is preaching in Jerusalem after the Resurrection, tells the Israelites that "the promise" is for you.

Acts 2:39 ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

5 To them belong
the patriarchs,
and
from their race,
according to the flesh,
is the Christ
who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

I have been arguing that being an Israelite is not primarily an issue of ethnicity. But verse 5 seems to explicitly speak of race. That is ethnicity.

I would never deny that the covenant promises were passed on from generation to generation from parents to children. Of course they were. The children of believing parents were included in the covenant. But biology alone was not all their was to being an Israelite.

Should a person refuse to give the covenant sign of circumcision to their children, they were to be "cut off" from Israel. And, maybe even more important to our discussion, those who were not biologically descended from the patriarchs were included in the lineage of the Messiah. Rabab and Ruth again come to mind. If biology were essential, then they could not be in the line. And let us not forget, Jesus' line is traced through Joseph. But Joseph was not even Jesus' biological father. He was his father through adoption alone.

But what about the ESV's translation: from their race? Well, as it turns out, this phrase was inserted by the translators.

^{KJV} **Romans 9:5** Whose *are* the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ *came*, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

^{YLT} **Romans 9:5** whose *are* the fathers, and of whom *is* the Christ, according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed to the ages. Amen.

From their race is added for explanation. But instead of explaining, it misleads. Paul is not so much talking about race as he is distinguishing Jesus' human ancestry from his divine ancestry. We have already spoken how Paul uses the phrase "according to the flesh."

Jesus, the Messiah, had to be an Israelite, a son of David, according to the laws of the covenant – legal ancestry, laws of adoption, etc.

In this sense, Jesus was truly a son of David. But Jesus was also divine. He was not simply a son of David. He was also David's Lord. He was over all. Jesus was not simply another Israelite. He was God over all. Being an Israelite was a huge deal!

With all of these privileges having been bestowed upon Israelites, then the natural conclusion is that they ought to be saved. They have surely been recipients of the love of God and nothing can separate one from the love of God. So, why is Israel not saved? Or, why are so many Israelites not being saved? That is the question that disturbs Paul. He will devote three chapters to answering this question.

It is not simply theological curiosity for Paul. Far too many people see these chapters in that way. Paul is defending the faithfulness of God to follow through on the promises to Israel. If God cannot be shown to be faithful to his promises to Israel, then how can we be sure that he will keep his promises to us? Or maybe, God is trying to be faithful, but he lacks the power to fulfill his word.

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

Has God not been able to keep his word of promise to Israel?

Paul tells us "No. God's word has not failed." When Paul gets to the end of these three chapters he will conclude

Romans 11:26 ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved

Applications:

1. The visible church matters to God and it ought to matter to us.

When Paul grieves over Israelites who are not believing, he does not do so on the basis of race or any other personal connection. He does so on the basis of their visible connection to the visible church. It is no different for us today. We are members of the visible church through baptism. If a member of the church is currently unbelieving, we ought to have the same attitude as Paul. He is not indifferent to them. He is broken to the core of his being. We might possibly feel this way when one of our own children walks away from the faith. And we should. But do we feel this way about those outside of our families?

Paul does not blame himself for the apostasy of his fellow Israelites. Nor does he think that he has the power to bring them back to faith. But he would give up his own salvation if he could. Do we feel this way about our brothers and sisters, according to the flesh?

Look around. You are seeing your brothers and sisters. Praise the Lord. But do you see those who have gone out from us? Not because they have moved away. Or have died. But because they have quit believing.

2. We must ask and answer biblically, “Has God’s Word failed them?”

The general unbelief of the world is expected. The promises of the Bible are not challenged by their unbelief. But the apostasy of those who are Israel, or in our day, who are baptized into Jesus Christ, most certainly raises the question: has God’s Word failed?

If you are not asking that question, then I don’t think that you really understand what Paul has been saying over the first eight chapters of Romans. And, when we get into the answers that Paul gives, it is important to remember that none of the answers removes the agony that exists in Paul’s heart over their current unbelief. If you are continuing in the faith, then the unbelief of anyone who has been baptized, ought to fill you with sorrow, even if you can theologically explain their unbelief.

3. When you grieve over the unbelief of a loved one, God grieves with you.

Paul’s attitude reflects God’s attitude. Paul is full of sorrow because he has been taught by God to care for all who are members of the visible church. Paul’s anguish is unceasing. O that our own hearts would be stirred for the reclaiming of covenant members who have been lost!

May our own prayers reflect God’s own heart of compassion. Amen!

