



Romans - Chapter Nine

Summary of Chapter Nine

Paul starts this chapter with an impassioned hope that his fellow countrymen, that is, the Jewish nation, including those in Palestine and those of the Diaspora, would turn to Christ for their own salvation just as Paul had done. After all, they were indeed the nation that God had chosen for himself. He had raised up the nation from one man, had brought them out of slavery, given them a homeland and a law to abide by. It was through this nation that the Christ would come into the world.

Paul then states that God's covenant promise had not failed for it was never intended that the children of God would be all those who were physical descendants of Abraham, and it can be clearly seen that the seed of promise was actually by election through the line of Abraham and was never intended to be all the descendants. This is something that continued beyond the era of the Patriarchs. Paul sees two distinct families through Abraham: those who can trace their ancestry to him and those that were predestined by God to be part of the family of faith.

Paul then goes on to show that God is not unjust nor does he choose people on the basis of their human abilities or achievements. He chooses them because he is God and all creation is in his hands. Paul uses the illustration of a potter making various objects to show that God can create anything or anyone for any purpose he chooses. He can even totally reshape them should he choose to do so and creation has no right and would be very foolish to challenge him over his decisions.

Paul then cleverly crafts the passage from the prophet Hosea with two from Isaiah to support and further illustrate the point he is making. It also demonstrates to the reader that what Paul was saying was there in scripture all along for many generations of the Jews to see, but they had misunderstood the scriptures and gone off in the wrong direction.

Unfortunately the chapter concludes just as Paul starts another phase of the argument that continues into Chapter 10. Here Paul shows that the Gentiles were chosen by faith even though they had never sought righteousness from God, mainly because of their ignorance. The Jews, who had sought the righteousness of God, failed to achieve it because of their misunderstanding of scripture, their role and the privileges given to them, and their persistence in seeking the righteousness of the law but not the righteousness of God. Paul concludes with another passage from Isaiah that refers to the Messiah, i.e. Jesus, and points out that for many in Israel he will be a stumbling block and that only a remnant of genetic Israel were destined to be saved by God to become a part of his true family.

V Romans 9:1-11:36 - God's righteousness to Israel and to the Gentiles

Paul has made it clear that God's saving promises have been fulfilled for the Gentiles. Indeed, the church of Jesus Christ now enjoys the spiritual blessings promised to Israel: the gift of the Spirit (Romans 8:9); adoption as God's children (Romans 8:14-17); future glory (Romans 8:17, and 8:30); election (Romans 8:33); and the promise of never being severed from God's love (Romans 8:35-39). Paul now asks in chapters 9-11 whether the promises made by God to ethnic Israel will be fulfilled. If his promises to the Jews remain unfulfilled, how can Gentile Christians be sure that he will fulfil the great promises that conclude Chapter 8? Paul answers that God is faithful to his saving promises to Israel (v.6), and that he will ultimately save his people (Romans 11:26).

V.a Romans 9:1-29 - God's sovereign choice

Earlier in his letter, Paul encountered a number of issues that he had to address. It may have seemed that, in the face of Israel's continued apostasy, God had given up on them and moved to the devout Gentiles instead. Paul has strongly refuted that suggestion. The faithfulness of God to his covenant bond with Israel was axiomatic for the Jew, and remained so for Paul. At that stage of his argument Paul had been unable to develop his basic claim. First it had been necessary to explain how the new stage of God's dealing with humankind, his righteousness, is offered to all, Jew first and then the Gentile. That done, and having lingered over the exposition to resolve misunderstandings, explore tensions, and exult the sweet foretaste of the not-yet consummation, Paul can now at last turn to the question he had left hanging in such unsatisfactory fashion at the beginning of Chapter 3. Given such righteousness extended to all, given such faithfulness to all, what of his covenant righteousness to Israel, how does his faithfulness stand in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness?

God's saving promises to Israel are irrevocable since they depend upon his word of promise and his electing grace.

V.a.i Romans 9:1-5 - The privileges and tragedy of Israel

In this passage, Paul wants to assert two key points: that God did choose Israel as his people, despite the anti-Semitic attitude of the church throughout history; and that Jesus is truly the Messiah of God.

On anti-Semitic attitudes, Tom Wright challenges: 'are we prejudiced because we criticise or do we criticise because we are prejudiced?' This comes about because of the rise in anti-Semitism that comes from the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinians and other Arabic neighbours, many of whom are Christians and the rest are in the main Muslims.

Unless it is accepted that Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, is the Christ, then the promises God made to Israel have no relevance to the Christian church today and therefore, if we cannot believe that God will keep his promises to Israel, why should we believe he will keep them for us?

¹ I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit — ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race,

Romans 9:1-3

Jesus showed there was no greater love for our fellow men than to lay down our lives for them which he had told his disciples in John 15:13 on the evening before he went to the Cross. Here, Paul has such great concern for the Jewish nation and for individual Jews, who are foregoing eternal salvation by dismissing the Gospel, that he would lay down his eternal life to have them saved. Such was his zeal and affection for his countrymen despite the number of times they had

and would oppose him: <<when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world>> (1 Corinthians 4:13), and have him killed: <<The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" >> (Acts 22:22). Of course, he still held strongly to the heritage they had as God's chosen people, believed in the promises and wanted his fellow countrymen to reap the rewards of those promises of God, and not to forsake them. And thus he demonstrated great love and sacrifice in this remark, for God may well have acted on it as a prayer.

I speak the truth; I am not lying. This remarkably emotional statement shows the depth of feeling that Paul had for his fellow countrymen who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. This would not only refute any allegations that he had turned his back on his people by going to the Gentiles but it would also add sincerity and honesty in the argument that was to follow. Paul evidently felt the strain imposed upon his Jewishness by his vocation as apostle to the Gentiles as a sharp pain within himself, his great sorrow and unceasing anguish. Those who thought Paul has reneged on his heritage had misunderstood both the heritage and Paul. Paul's claim is precisely that he is being true to his heritage in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. And it is precisely the misunderstanding of that claim which causes him such continuous and painful anguish, for it means that most of his fellow Jews are failing to enter into their own heritage.

Paul suffers from great anguish because his Jewish countrymen are unsaved: <<Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved>> (Romans 10:1). Indeed, if it were possible, Paul might almost choose to be cursed, i.e. to suffer God's punishment in hell, so that his fellow Jews would be saved. Moses is seen to respond in similar fashion when God threatened to exterminate the entire nation for building a Golden Calf to worship in the desert, as recorded in Exodus 32:30-32 <<The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" >>. But Paul would probably have known that his offer would achieve nothing, for none but Christ could be any person's substitute to bear God's wrath.

Probably the worst fate that could befall a Jew is something that appears time and again in the Law of Moses, and that is to be cut off from the people of Israel, e.g. <<If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people>> (Leviticus 7:27). Paul seems to feel this is his punishment for being the apostle to the Gentiles, as he has been ostracised by many of the Jews for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, and here he is willing to take on an even worse punishment than that prescribed by the law, which is to be cursed and cut off from Christ. Being with Christ is the most important thing in life for Paul, and it clearly demonstrates his love that this is what he was prepared to do for his brother Israelites. The problem for Paul is that most of the Jews failed to see the fulfilment of God's promises in Jesus, and had not turned to him, instead taking a different route that would lead them away from God and not towards him, thereby nullifying the promises they so depended on. This is something that clearly had Paul in quite an emotional state, as this is a game for the highest possible stakes and the Jews are gambling everything they have on the losing horse.

My brothers, those of my own race. In rejoicing to participate in the wider kinship on the level of the Spirit, Greek kata pneuma, Paul cannot and will not forget his natural blood relationships, kata sarka, i.e. according to the flesh.

⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.

Romans 9:4

In vv.4-5 the great privileges of Israel are listed. The six blessings here can be divided into two parallel lists of three:

- Adoption Law
- Glory Worship
- Covenant Promises

The people of Israel became God's adopted people when God saved them from Egypt. Paul uses this quite deliberately rather than his usual terms for the Jews as he wants to reinforce them as the people of the covenant God made with Abraham and reiterated through Jacob: <<God said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." So he named him Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you" >> (Genesis 35:10-12).

Adoption as sons invokes thoughts that would take the Jews back to God bringing his people out of Egypt, calling them his son. This was clearly a divine act of sheer grace. Gentile believers should not think that their adoption has nullified the original adoption of Israel. Unbelieving Israel should recognise that in and through Paul's Gospel, God is exercising the same gratuitous mercy which first established the covenant with Israel.

Divine glory here probably refers to the glory of God in the tabernacle and the temple: <<The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God>> (2 Chronicles 5:13-14).

Israel received the covenants in which the Lord promised to save them. God gave his people his law at Mount Sinai, prescribed their worship in the Mosaic Law, and gave them his saving promises.

The law is referred to here in a positive sense, in that it was given to Israel as a blessing; it is in essence the law of the Spirit now available for all. So too the worship of the one God, which Israel had preserved through all these centuries and is now being offered to all, where the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is being worshiped and served in the Spirit. Gentile believers cannot claim ownership of the promises which are still there for unbelieving Israel to claim, just as the requirements of the law are there to be fulfilled by all who walk according to the Spirit, although we live by grace of course.

The use of the plural 'covenants' is interesting; Paul could be referring to the renewal of the old covenant, i.e. with Abraham, at Sinai, and with David, or he could be referring to the old and the new, his usual reference: <<These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother>> (Galatians 4:24-26). Israel still has first claim on the new covenant as well as the old. However much more widely the new has been extended, it is still primarily Israel and Judah who were in view when it was first announced: <<"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made

with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" >> (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

Romans 9:5

The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are those through whom Israel is formed. Most importantly, Jesus the Christ is also from the Jewish people, and he is not merely a human being but is also fully God. Therefore, the fact that so many Jews have rejected Christ brings acute pain to Paul (v.2).

Christ, who is God over all is in full conformity with Israel's monotheism, as Paul frequently associates Christ with God and attributing divine functions to him, e.g. <<To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ>> (Romans 1:7), and: <<yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live>> (1 Corinthians 8:6). It is clearly Paul's desire to stress the universality of God's embrace, Gentile as well as Jew, which results in the unusual phrasing.

Paul held onto the privileges given to the Jews by God to whom he gave his law: <<He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel>> (Psalm 147:19), and: <<What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?>> (Deuteronomy 4:7-8). They had been given the promises, they had the covenants and, despite their own shortcomings as a nation over the generations, they held patriotically to their relationship to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Messiah too had come from their physical stock as promised. Not as an angel but as the seed of Abraham: <<For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants>> (Hebrews 2:16). Although they had failed many times before, God had remained faithful to his people and Paul did not want them to fail at this last hurdle, but to accept the Gospel, the fulfilment of all the law, the covenants, the promises and the prophecies.

This is once again a dramatic switch from the amazing high point at the end of Chapter 8, and Paul intends it to be so for it should bring us into prayer, humility, reflection and hopefully wisdom and understanding. That reflection should start with all the marvellous privileges we have become aware of in the first 8 chapters, especially the most recent. What the law could not do, God has now done and those who have chosen Christ now fully benefit from that. We do so by obeying God in faith: <<Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith>> (Romans 1:5), and: <<And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose>> (Romans 8:28), and they inherit the promise that God had made to the patriarchs and through the prophets to Israel.

The chosen people of God are now those who follow Christ and do not need to be ethnically Jewish, for Jesus is Lord of all. Those Jews who have not committed themselves to Jesus as

the Messiah, i.e. they do not believe him to be the Messiah of God, are still the people of Christ but only according to the flesh, not according to the Spirit, which is what is required to be recipients of God's eternal promises.

V.a.ii Romans 9:6-13 - Abraham's two families

Although the promises made to Abraham were to his seed, they were for Isaac and not Ishmael, and then for Jacob and not Esau. Therefore, what God is doing now by making the promises valid for the true believers in the promised Messiah was not to invalidate the promises made to Abraham but were, in fact, the same, as they followed the seed of promise, i.e. all those who believe. It also demonstrates that the seed of promise is not physical and biological, but spiritual, a gift of God's regeneration.

The Jews may have considered themselves as, and even boasted in the fact of, being children of Abraham, but John the Baptist had warned them: <<And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham>> (Matthew 3:9), and so did Jesus: <<I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father." "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did>> (John 8:38-39). But they were not children of God because they rejected the Gospel, and grace does not run in the blood.

In typical Jewish fashion, Paul retells the ancestral story that is passed on from generation to generation; but he tells it here with a different twist. If you are on a journey and misread your directions you end up in the wrong place or even completely lost. The OT scriptures are the directions that the Jews had relied on for generations. It is possible the guy giving the directions has got it wrong, or that he has changed the destination, or simply can't deliver on his promises, in which case the whole world is in an even bigger mess than we think it is. Paul doesn't believe so. He believes the directions are sound but that he and the other Jews had misinterpreted the instructions, and had gone off in a wrong direction, finding themselves in the wrong place. Like many drivers who encounter this situation, they just carry on regardless, hoping to find a turning that doesn't exist to get them to the place they need to be. Paul says this is the wrong policy. Therefore, he goes back to the beginning and retraces the route using the correct directions given to discover that God intended choosing a people that would come to him by the Spirit, in faith, and not by biological descendancy and cultural dependency.

What Paul's argument will show is that Abraham was not chosen for his strong moral character or beliefs. What God was doing was implementing a process of selection right from the outset. This was the foundation of the promises made to Abraham originally. Not to bless Abraham but to produce a line of descendancy that led to the Messiah.

⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

Romans 9:6-7

Even though many Jews have failed to believe, God's promise to them has not failed, for, as many commentators agree, there was never a promise made that every Jewish person would be saved. It was never the case that all the physical children of Abraham were truly part of the people of God, or indeed the Israel of God: <<Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God>> (Galatians 6:16), i.e. genetic descendants who worship God in the Spirit, for Genesis 21:12 teaches: <<But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned>>, i.e. that the line of promise is traced through Isaac,

not Ishmael. Therefore, as far as the promises of the covenant made with Abraham were concerned, only Isaac and his offspring would be recognised as Abraham's seed.

Having said that, Paul himself seems to disagree with our present day commentators: <<And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins" >> (Romans 11:26-27), which will be discussed further in Romans Chapter 11.

⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

Romans 9:8

The words God's children shows that Paul is thinking of salvation: <<The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children>> (Romans 8:16), and hence he is not thinking merely of physical blessings given to Israel.

Paul seeks to make a clear distinction between the natural children and the children of the promise. The idea of the chosen people being God's children was well established. Paul wants to establish further that the covenanted status of the descendants of Abraham is their status before God. It is a status that the natural descendants of Abraham cannot assume for themselves by virtue of being the natural descendants of Abraham. The ground of filial relationship to God is not simply filial relationship to Abraham. This route was only made possible though if the Messiah was drawn from a people, not holy and righteous, but from a people who were themselves part of the problem. God had to deal with the evil of sin in sinful flesh.

⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac.

Romans 9:9-10

The promise: <<Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him>> (Genesis 18:10), and: <<Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son>> (Genesis 18:14), was not given to Hagar, see Genesis Chapter 16, but was specifically given to Sarah and her offspring. The birth of Esau and Jacob is further evidence that God did not promise that every person of Jewish descent would be saved, for they had the same father and mother and were even twins, and yet God chose Jacob and not Esau: <<"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the Lord says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" >> (Malachi 1:2b-3a), although this is in reference to the land of Edom that Esau effectively founded rather than the individual.

Again, Paul indicates some form of selection by quoting Genesis 17:19 and 21:12. After all Hagar conceived Ishmael in the flesh, nothing supernatural but a process, albeit miraculous, of natural regeneration. This represents those that expect justification and salvation by their own strength and righteousness. But Isaac was born to Sarah, by faith: <<By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise>> (Hebrews 11:11), when the flesh was dead and only the Spirit could achieve this work: <<At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now>> (Galatians 4:29). Those who follow in this path are children of the promise: <<Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise>> (Galatians 4:28). This point pushes further the assertion that the founding fathers show that Israel's own election was not in terms of natural

descent and law, but from the outset, and thus characteristically, in terms of promise and faith. Consequently, Paul implies, the Jews as a nation cannot and should not object to Paul's Gospel; for to do so is to misunderstand their own gospel of election.

Paul also repeats that Christ has superseded the ceremonial law: <<For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh>> (Philippians 3:3), although he had not abolished God's law but fulfilled it in all righteousness.

¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand:

Romans 9:11

God did not choose Jacob on the basis of anything in Jacob or Esau's life, but to achieve the fulfilment of God's purpose in election. Having just established that election is not based on birthright, here Paul shows that it is not by works of the law either. Christians can be assured, therefore, that God's promise will be fulfilled because it depends solely upon his will. The contrast between works and calling shows that salvation is in view, not merely the historical destiny of Israel as a nation. For the OT background on election, we can also read: <<And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion">> (Exodus 33:19), <<"I have loved you," says the Lord. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the Lord says. "Yet I have loved Jacob">> (Malachi 1:2), and: <<Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves>> (Ephesians 1:3-6).

What God was doing, Paul has decided, was successively selecting, not just one family through Abraham, but refining it by selecting one family within each generation. This is thinking that would have been contemporary within Jewish society as far as the Patriarchs go, but Paul is unravelling it further to say that it continued until it came down to Jesus, and that he alone took on the full identity of Israel in himself. This way God was working within history to provide a Saviour from within Israel and not for Israel. Salvation was always for everyone but there had to be a seed of promise for the line to arrive at; who was that seed to be? It would be the unique Son of God, born through a Davidic bloodline, but much more than through his genetic bloodline, i.e. he was born through his divine Spiritual conception.

¹² not by works but by him who calls – she was told, "The older will serve the younger."

Romans 9:12

Not by works. References to 'doing good or evil', and to 'works of the law', are not to be construed as an accusation on Paul's part that his fellow Jews, as a whole, thought of their election, or of their final acquittal at God's judgement, as something to be earned by performing works of the law. Nor does Paul wish to indicate that doing good is not something to aspire to and does not want the notion of doing good to bear the negative connotations that 'works of the law' has. The sole purpose is to show that God chose Jacob over Esau irrespective of anything they may later do; remembering, of course, that Jacob later would be a surplanter of Esau's birthright! It also clearly demonstrates that election is not based on keeping the law either. Those Jews who insist it is either the law or works of the law that distinguish them as a

nation are denying their own election, something Paul sees as intolerable especially for one who desperately wants to be loyal both to his Jewish heritage and to the revelation of Christ.

The promise given to Rebekah: <<The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger">> (Genesis 25:23), was that God had chosen the younger Jacob over the older Esau. One of the themes in Romans Chapters 9-11 is that God works in surprising ways, so that no one can ever presume upon his grace.

¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Romans 9:13

The citation of Malachi 1:2b-3a also shows that God set his saving love on Jacob and rejected, i.e. hated Esau. Hated is startling, but as a sinner Esau did not deserve to be chosen by God, who remains just in not choosing everyone. The salvation of anyone at all, comes only from God's mercy and grace. As noted earlier, this reference is more toward the land of Edom and not Esau the man.

As noted, Ishmael was born to Hagar, Sarah's maid, according to the flesh and not the Spirit, but Isaac was born of the Spirit and the selection of Isaac over Ishmael may seem simple enough to the human mind. This is not the case with Jacob and Esau, where they were twins, still struggling in Rebekah's womb when God stated the younger will be served by the elder. God chooses, not based on works or character, but by his divine, sovereign and perfect will. The quote from Malachi 1:2a-3b refers to the preference of Israel over Edom rather than the selection of the individual men. Both Israel and Edom had Abraham and Isaac as their patriarchs, but Edom had no law, no priests, no temple and apparently no special favour in the eyes of God. In fact, God seemed to have less regard for them than other Gentile nations at the time: <<Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever>> (Obadiah 10), and: <<But Egypt will be desolate, Edom a desert waste, because of violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed innocent blood>> (Joel 3:19). David showed them little regard in his time: <<King David dedicated these articles to the LORD, as he had done with the silver and gold he had taken from all these nations: Edom and Moab, the Ammonites and the Philistines, and Amalek>> (1 Chronicles 18:11). God chose Israel to receive all the blessings and covenant promises. But, by stating this, it seems that Paul has rescued God's reputation from one of incompetence or failing to keep his promises, to one of flagrant favouritism and injustice.

Paul's use of Malachi Chapter 1 does show that Israel is favoured over the likes of Edom and with that comes not satisfaction and relaxation in the promise, but increased responsibility, and especially culpability, for taking forward the promises of God to the world.

The reference to the younger shall be served by the elder brother opens up an interesting avenue for us to pursue in thought. Israel, in the sight of God, is the elder brother, with the younger brother being the Gentiles. Thus, by crossing the hands from the head of one to another, like Jacob would do with Manasseh and Ephraim, so too God has now done between the Jew and the Gentile, letting the younger be served by the elder brother in preference in the church of Christ. Similarities can be seen in the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:11-32. Jacob may have been seen to steal his brother Esau's birthright (Genesis 25:33), but the birthright in Christ has been gifted to those who believe, ahead of the Jews who have chosen to reject the Gospel and Jesus as the Christ.

V.a.iii Romans 9:14-24 - God's purpose and justice

Thus far Paul has argued in effect that his countrymen's large scale failure to respond to the Gospel is rooted in a misunderstanding of the word of God about their own election as the

people of God. He has more to say about the word of God to Israel and its continuity or fulfilment in the Gospel which he preaches. But at this point he evidently has decided to examine further the corollary of nonelection, to explore the dark side of the moon of God's purpose in election using whatever light he can find in scripture. His first readers might think that in so doing he has taken an unnecessary sidetrack. It was enough surely to have shown that Israel had misunderstood the Gospel. But Paul's anguish at his own people's failure is not so easily assuaged, and his more sensitive readers would probably realise that he is still grappling with the problem of Israel's unbelief, that in posing the problem of those passed over by God, he is still thinking primarily of Israel, that in achieving some sort of theological rationale concerning the nonelect, Paul could hope to find a theological rationale for Israel's de facto denial of their election.

Here Paul looks at the issue as to whether God is random in preselecting some people and rejecting others, which would appear to make God unrighteous, something that Paul flatly refutes, for the God of the whole earth must do right: <<Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" >> (Genesis 18:25), and: <<But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?>> (Romans 3:5-6).

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses,
"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Romans 9:14-15

Since God chose Jacob instead of Esau before they were born, without regard as to how good or bad either of them would be, the question naturally arises: 'Is God just in choosing one over the other?' God is just because no one deserves to be saved, something confirmed by Romans 3:23 <<for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>>, and the salvation of anyone at all is due to God's compassion and mercy alone, as the citation of Exodus 33:19b, quoted in this verse, affirms. Paul has already discussed a similar question with regard to final judgement in Chapter 2. From the different perspective of election, the primary question is to do with God's choice and rejection, not with man's merits or demerits; the central issue focuses on God's purpose and intention, not on man's deserving of praise or blame.

Paul almost certainly intends that v.15 be taken in context, an intention probably signalled by his introductory phrase, a word specifically directed to Moses, rather than the less specific 'it is written', in which case the point of significance is that Exodus 33:18-23 <<Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" >>, comes closer than anywhere else in the Jewish Scriptures to revealing the innermost nature of God. No man can see God and live. But Moses was evidently permitted to see something of his glory and given a deeper insight into the meaning of his name. And the revelation was summed up in those very words quoted by Paul. The God of Israel is first and foremost a God of mercy and compassion.

The covenant name Yahweh signifies that his choice of Israel was motivated solely by pity and compassion.

¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

Romans 9:16

Salvation, then, is not ultimately based on human free will, i.e. man's desire or effort, but depends entirely on God's merciful will. The point being underlined again is that God's purpose is not conditioned on Israel's goodwill and effort, or that God's faithfulness is predicated on God's election, and does not depend on what anyone desires or does. The additional assurance afforded by God's word to Moses is that the purpose is one of compassion, that election is God demonstrating his character of mercy. However, we should not be too quick to generalise here, as Paul seems to be thinking solely in terms of salvation history, of God's purpose for Israel. The contrast too is limited to the point at hand, and the alternatives posed are God's election on the one hand and Israel's widespread belief that their obedience to the law, whether in intention or in fact, was a factor in sustaining their covenant status before God. It is the latter which Paul disputes on the basis of Israel's own scriptures dealing with their election.

In respect to those on whom God shows mercy, he quotes a scripture in v.15 to show God's sovereignty in the way he dispenses his favours, as shown in Exodus 33:19b. As all men are equally fallen and guilty, God, in a way of sovereignty, picks out some to be vessels of grace and glory. He dispenses his gifts to whom he will without giving us any reason, according to his own good pleasure. This imports the absoluteness of God's will, he will do what he will, in line with his name and his character, <<I AM WHO I AM>> (Exodus 3:14). God does not bestow his grace and favour on any man according to his merit or endeavours, but purely through free grace and mercy. Thus God's people, whether applied to the nation of Israel in the past, or believers in the Gospel in the NT era, are a special people, not because of who they are but because of God.

In the case at the start of the NT era, we see unworthy Gentiles, undeserving and ill-deserving by nature, being grafted into the church and the majority of the Jews being ignored. The Gentiles had sat in darkness when called: <<the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned>> (Matthew 4:16). They did not know what it was that they did not have, nor did they crave after salvation as the Jews did, who knew of all the promises of a life to come. Isaiah spoke of the Gentiles: <<I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'>> (Isaiah 65:1), and, as such, all honour and glory goes to God: <<Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness>> (Psalm 115:1).

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

Romans 9:17

For this very purpose. Paul quotes Exodus 9:16 to show that God is sovereign over evil as well. Even the wrath of man praises God: <<Surely your wrath against men brings you praise, and the survivors of your wrath are restrained>> (Psalm 76:10), for God installed Pharaoh as ruler and hardened his heart so that his own saving power and glorious name would be spread throughout the whole world. It is interesting that for the first time Paul moves away from the LXX and quotes the Hebrew text, which is more ambiguous in emphasising Pharaoh's role in the drama and the lack of free will in his role. For Paul the Jew could, of course, claim that the result of the Exodus had been to make known the redemptive power of God throughout the world; the centrality of the Exodus in Jewish thought, and their own subsequent dispersion throughout the world, meant that God's saving act in calling his people out of Egypt was celebrated wherever Jews of the Diaspora came together for prayer. It was within that context that Pharaoh was remembered too, within the proclamation of God's purpose of mercy. Within

that purpose, Pharaoh's obduracy served as the foil to set off God's redemptive power. The reader might already recognise the implication that Israel's rejection of the Gospel was to be explained in a similar way. The antithetical role filled by Esau and Pharaoh in relation to Israel's election and redemption is now being filled by the bulk of Israel in relation to God's calling of Gentile as well as Jew through the Gospel. But the full development of that theme is yet to come.

Paul demonstrates that God raises up those who are evil for his own purpose: <<The Lord works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster>> (Proverbs 16:4), and: <<And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day>> (Matthew 11:23). Paul cites the case of Pharaoh, whom God raised up to great worldly glory, honour, wealth and privilege, only to have him harden his heart so that God's power may be seen through him. And yet Pharaoh was given the choice and indeed hardened his own heart, before God made it permanently hard by removing softening grace, thereby handing him over to Satan and his own will, rather than obeying God, which he could and should have done to start with. And God then showed his power by being able to overcome even the most powerful human on the planet in his generation, for God's honour and praise: <<Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?>> (Exodus 15:11).

What it does show is not a randomness of selection but a God that is beholden to no man, who has no debts to pay, and who has complete and sole ownership of his grace and mercy. We have forfeited any rights to it thousands of times over so any that receive it can do nothing else but praise God; those who do not have it can do nothing but blame themselves: <<You are destroyed, O Israel, because you are against me, against your helper>> (Hosea 13:9).

¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Romans 9:18

Did God show mercy to the Gentiles? It was because he would have mercy on them. Were the Jews hardened? It was because it was God's good pleasure to remove softening grace from them, and to give them up to their chosen affected unbelief. Jesus prayer in Luke 10:21 explains this: <<At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure>>.

Paul does not balk at bringing out the full awkwardness of the corollary. If Israel's election and redemption was an act of God's free choice, without reference to Israel's intention and conduct, then the antithetical role of Pharaoh within that purpose must have been similarly without reference to Pharaoh's intention and conduct. It must have been something brought about by God himself. Paul does not hesitate to draw this severe conclusion: God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. That God hardened Pharaoh's heart means that his obduracy was not simply his choice or doing, as though any man could thwart God's saving purpose for others. Nor was it that God had to adapt and modify his purpose to take account of Pharaoh's attitude and actions, as though they were something unexpected. Pharaoh's opposition was willed by God, was brought about by God, as the scriptures clearly related; it was part of God's same merciful purpose, an essential element in the demonstration of God's saving power. We should note that Paul does not make this point simply out of the desire for rigorously logical theology. His line of argument is determined by scripture; it is because this emphasis is part of God's word that he cannot avoid it. He pursues it partly because he wants his own theology to be shaped in accord with scripture, and partly

because he sees in this biblical emphasis on divine hardening an explanation for Israel's present hardness.

Whom he wants or wills. In making the point, Paul has also deliberately broadened it out beyond the particular case of Israel and Pharaoh, whom he wants, presumably precisely because he sees in this key incident within salvation history an important principle of wider application. All honour to Paul that he does so, that he does not retreat into a narrow election conscious position of superiority over the nonelect, careless for the salvation of all but the elect. But then this is what we should expect from the apostle to the Gentiles, who has clearly shown so far in this letter that it is just such pride in national identity and election which is at the root of Israel's misunderstanding of the covenant, and which largely explains Israel's failure to recognise that God's purpose of mercy extends beyond Israel 'according to the flesh'. By liberating the clear scriptural principle from its narrower salvation history context he can explain God's wider purpose of mercy and throw light on the puzzle of why the bulk of Israel has so far rejected the Gospel.

¹⁹ One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

Romans 9:19

For who resists his will? If salvation ultimately depends upon God, and he has mercy on and hardens whomever he pleases, then how can he find anyone guilty? How can he charge anyone with guilt since his will is irresistible?

The trouble with such a strong view of election and rejection without reference to subsequent deeds and misdeeds is that it makes God's judgement on these deeds and misdeeds seem so unfair. The two perspectives on human life, indicated in this verse, are from opposite ends of the time scale, election and judgement, and they seem to conflict. How can one retain a belief in a judgement that is just when the deeds on which that judgement falls were not the acts of free will? How can God blame others for what he himself brought about? Does scripture not in fact present Pharaoh simply as a puppet? Anyone knows that if blame attaches to a puppet's actions, it is the puppeteer who should be blamed, not the puppet!

Paul might have replied by pointing to the other passages in the Exodus' narrative which speak of Pharaoh hardening his own heart, e.g. <<But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said>> (Exodus 8:15), <<But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go>> (Exodus 8:32), and: <<When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts>> (Exodus 9:34). From the perspective of Israel's election, Pharaoh's obduracy was part of God's purpose, but for Pharaoh himself it was his own act of free choice, and, as such, deserving of blame and punishment. But Paul does not take that path. Those in close touch with his train of thought would have remembered that he had in fact already shown that election and judgement can be reconciled, in Romans 2:1-3:20, that being outside of the elect people of God is no guarantee of final condemnation, just as being inside the elect people of God is no guarantee of final justification; that, as we might say, God's firm purpose in the broad sweep of salvation history through the centuries does not exclude or excuse any individual within that purpose from answering for his or her own deeds. So it may well be that Paul thought he need say no more on the subject of judgement.

²⁰ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Romans 9:20-21

But what of the objection, if God gives effectual grace to some and denies it to others, why does he judge those to whom he denies it? Paul's first response to this is to say, Who are you, a man to talk back to God; a lump of clay to challenge the potter in his choice of what he makes? He is our master and we are his servants. It is not our place to challenge God: <<Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them>> (Titus 2:9). A truly humble spirit would acknowledge that God, the divine potter, can and does make people different, out of the same human clay, very different characters and personalities, that there is a givenness in people's make-up which fits them for different roles, differences in temperament, differences in capacities and capabilities. There are some of whom it could be said 'that one is made for greatness', while others seem fit only for menial and even disreputable roles.

As the potter, God can do whatever he will with the lump of clay, demonstrating that, according to his sovereign will, he can do what is right and, in the time of Jeremiah, went on to all but destroy Israel at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar for their continued apostasy.

Isaiah often uses this analogy to good effect: <<You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?>> (Isaiah 29:16), <<Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?>> (Isaiah 45:9), and: <<Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand>> (Isaiah 64:8). They speak not of lifeless objects but of God dealing with rebellious Israel when he was trying to get them to respond to his gentle shaping hands. This is not so much a passage of God working with Israel but his working through Israel.

Some of Paul's readers might expect him to appeal to human free will to resolve the problem posed in v.19. Instead, he insists that finite human beings may not rebelliously question God's ways; that God as a potter has the right to do what he wishes with his creation: <<This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel">> (Jeremiah 18:1-6). For Paul there is no higher power than God; the ultimate shape of human destiny is none other than the purpose of God. The imagery of the potter and his clay artefacts serves this end well, for it was both characteristically and distinctively Jewish in its emphasis that the divine potter's authority over his products was the authority of a powerful creator.

The honourable vessels, i.e. some pottery made for noble purposes, and dishonourable vessels, i.e. those made for common use, in this context represent those who are saved and unsaved. Paul affirms that humans are guilty for their sin, and he offers no philosophical resolution as to how this fits with divine sovereignty. He does insist that God ordains all that happens: <<In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will>> (Ephesians 1:11), even though God himself does not sin and is not morally responsible for sin.

The potter makes some objects useful and attractive; others to be despicable, fit only to be returned to the hole in the ground from where the clay was dug, vessels filled with God's wrath and to be destroyed. This is done in order to show the world just how much God hates sin, and how he will destroy it in all his righteousness and through his power: <<They will be punished

with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power>> (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Jesus statement to the Jews in Matthew 23:32 <<Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!>>, shows just how long suffering God is with those who oppose his will.

In all this we must remember that all of us are deserving of instantaneous death through our sinful nature and that God allows any to live is a sign of his great grace, love and mercy for all mankind.

For those that are to be objects of use, we have vessels of mercy. These are the fruit not of merit but of mercy. In them God reveals his glory but also prepares them for glory. We can prepare ourselves for hell, but only God can prepare us for heaven, if we allow him to mould us according to his will: <<Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come>> (2 Corinthians 5:5). These are the ones called to his purpose, predestined to be called children of God.

Fortunately, using the pottery analogy, Israel rebelled at the early stages and the potter can rework the clay, in God's case he has the obligation to rework it through the covenant promise. Had they rebelled later on after firing then the only options are either to stay as they are or be smashed to pieces.

God has two options: to rework the clay or to throw it out and use new clay. Which is it to be? This is a question that lies at the heart of the puzzle of God, the world, Israel, Jesus and the church.

In sending Israel into exile, God reworked the original clay, to have ignored their disobedience would have been to uphold Israel's favoured nation status rather than salvation for all. To have thrown away the clay and started again would be against the covenant promise and not in keeping with God's character.

It is important to grasp the wider context of Paul's argument here and the force of what he is saying within that context. His first readers could be well aware of the widespread preoccupation in the ancient world with the problem of fate and destiny, the sense of the inevitability of what transpires, and often oppressive awareness that one could never escape one's appointed portion in life, and above all, one's lot in death; hence, the popularity of the art of astrology, not least in Rome itself. Paul's readers would probably be aware also that this wider speculation was no stranger to the kind of problems Paul poses here: the recognition that a person's fate might be as much the outworking of his or her own nature as it was the outcome of divine action, and the unresolved issue of whether Zeus was master of fate or ultimately subject to it like the other gods. So Paul is not dealing with a question which would be foreign to his readers, nor would the element of determinism in his treatment be seen rather to lie in his insistence on treating the question in Hebraic rather than Hellenistic terms, in terms of God the Creator rather than of implacable and remorseless fate.

²² What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory —

Romans 9:22-23

God created a world in which both his wrath and his mercy would be displayed. Indeed, his mercy shines against the backdrop of his just wrath, showing thereby that the salvation of any person is due to the marvellous grace and love of God. If this is difficult to understand, it is because people mistakenly think God owes them salvation!

Objects of his wrath. God does not seek revenge, nor does he take delight in punishing the wicked. His wrath is not to be confused with anger and it is applied with full justification according to God's perfect will. The objects are not just idolatrous pagans but unbelieving Israelites as well.

Prepared for destruction. Again, the analogy comes to mind. Perhaps God will destroy what is flawed and remake it into something useful, or perhaps he will just destroy it; Paul does not elaborate on his thinking here. His point is simply that God will not settle for a flawed creation: his will expressed both in the outworking of man's own sin and in the day of judgement is the destruction of that which is flawed.

Objects of mercy. God is well known for the mercy he has always shown towards his people; it is inherent in his nature to be loving and merciful to all mankind, his favoured creature: <<And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness">> (Exodus 34:6), <<The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made">> (Psalm 145:8-9), and: <<He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity">> (Jonah 4:2). God has Jew and Gentile in mind as his objects of mercy.

Prepared in advance for glory. We are not just put through a process of preparation after coming to faith; God foreknew those who would answer the call to faith. The broadening out of God's call beyond Israel as a national entity was always in view. It was not simply an afterthought, a change of plan in view of Israel's intransigence. God planned it so from the beginning! His choice of Israel as a covenant people, as the objects of his patience and mercy, always had this wider call in view, an objective of mercy which extended well beyond Israel as such. So too, the message is becoming steadily clearer. Israel's present intransigence is no less within the purpose of God, part of his purpose of mercy for all, Gentile and Jew alike.

²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Romans 9:24

In his grace and mercy God also called people to himself from both the Jews and the Gentiles. It is now clear who the 'objects of mercy' are, and the not so perceptive reader would suddenly realise by way of contrast who the 'objects of wrath' are. It is just the contrast which Paul has turned on its head. It is Israel who now benefits from God's delayed punishment and the call in which Israel had always rested is now extended to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, which is the way God had always intended it should be.

V.a.iv Romans 9:25-29 - God calls a remnant

Paul has now brought into the open what he had been building up to throughout Chapter 9, both in demonstrating that Israel's call never had regard to race or conduct, including works of the law, and in turning on its head Israel's belief that others were rejected in order that Israel might be chosen and redeemed. He now follows through by citing a catena of texts which confirm that God's purpose never had Israel as a people solely in view and never Israel as a whole or Israel the nation as such. The seemingly new range of God's call, embracing neither Jew alone nor Gentile alone, but all who respond to that call, whether Jew or Gentile was foreseen and spoken of long before in scripture.

²⁵ As he says in Hosea:

“I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people;
and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,”

²⁶ and,

“It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them,
‘You are not my people,’
they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

Romans 9:25-26

Paul sees, in the words addressed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, prior to its annihilation by the Assyrians, a foreshadowing of his point. By his call, God can transform the covenant status of those outside, or rejected from the covenant.

Paul quotes Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 to illustrate the stunning grace of God, that those who are not my people, will be called sons of the living God. In calling the Gentiles to salvation, God calls a sinful people to himself; just as in saving Israel he showed mercy to the undeserving. No one can presume on God’s grace. In calling anyone to salvation, God shows undeserved mercy to those who were not his people.

The Gentiles referenced there were not previously thought to be God’s people but this shows just how wide reaching God’s grace and mercy has always been to those that knew him not, nor were in anyway clean or righteous. Hosea 1:10 indicates they will not need to become proselytes to come into the family of God, for wherever they are, God will be with them and will own them.

The main force of the of the quotation, achieved by altering Hosea 2:23 to introduce the word ‘call’, is to emphasise that being the people of God is something brought about solely by God’s invitation, that his call can completely transform what had appeared to be a clear-cut case of divine rejection. And that in the first instance would be seen as a firm scriptural counter to Israel’s presumption of a still sustained favoured nation status. The privilege of sonship, with which Israel had been favoured, has been extended to all who respond to God’s call now through the Gospel.

²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:

“Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea,
only the remnant will be saved.

²⁸

For the Lord will carry out
his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”

²⁹ It is just as Isaiah said previously:

“Unless the Lord Almighty
had left us descendants,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah.”

Romans 9:27-29

The second scripture refers exclusively to Israel. For someone as familiar with the sacred writings of his people as Paul was, the association of these passages was both verbally and thematically appropriate, both passages referring as they do to the Northern Kingdom in its decline and fall. The Isaiah passage is striking for it echoes one of the central covenant promises to the patriarchs, of seed like the sand by the sea, and implies therefore that even the foundation promises of the covenant could provide no guarantee that God would exercise an indiscriminating favour toward Israel. On the contrary, the promise could be fulfilled, and yet only a small proportion, the remnant, will be saved.

The fact that only some of the Israelites will be saved, was prophesied in Isaiah 10:22-23. Most of Israel was judged, and only the remnant experienced salvation. Indeed, as Isaiah 1:9 says, Israel deserved to be wiped out like Sodom and Gomorrah, but God had mercy and spared some, and indeed the promise remains: <<And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved>> (Joel 2:32a). In his use of Isaiah 1:9, Paul aligns remnant to seed in his discussion point on vv.7-8.



Isaiah prophesied the casting off of the Jews, and speaks of saving only a remnant of them. Although some commentators look upon this as a prophecy to say only a remnant would be saved from the then forthcoming destruction of the nation by the Assyrian King Sennacherib, circa 720BC, it is actually looking forward to the Messianic age and thus Paul uses it here.

This painted sketch is of the mighty Assyrian king Sennacherib relief, which was discovered on the walls of his palace in Khorsabad, near the ruins of ancient Nineveh.

God is still keeping his covenant promise to Abraham made in Genesis 22:17 in full force and virtue: <<I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies>>; but as we know from Jesus' teaching: <<for many are invited, but few are chosen>> (Matthew 22:14). The second quote of a remnant comes from Isaiah 1:9, which shows that in a time of destruction, God will preserve his seed. Therefore, it is not strange that God would see many of his people destroyed and only a remnant remain.

God had to cast Israel off as his people, whittled them down to a remnant and then make them his people again, i.e. reforming the clay into a new pot. Paul then adds Isaiah to Hosea to show that, even if the promise of God that Abraham's biological children should be as numerous as the sand on the sea shore, only a remnant of them would be children of the promise, i.e. come to faith in Jesus. Paul's conclusion is that God's word has not failed but has come all too uncomfortably true.

God will see his plan through for the whole world and in that plan there will be a remnant from biological Israel, perhaps the 144,000 of Revelation Chapters 7 and 14.

The idea of a remnant was well accepted in Paul's day by some, as they had observed how many Jews were turning away from God and his laws. This is true in Israel today. There are of course many devout Jews but the nation as a whole is secular. There is no promise from God that the land we know as Israel today, which itself is just a remnant of the Promised Land, has any special place, although some Christians hold that Acts 1:9-11 means that Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives for his Second Coming: <<After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" >>. However, there is no guarantee of this either as most commentators understand it to mean that Jesus will certainly return in a physical body and not as an ephemeral spirit.

The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls for example, as with some other groups, see the remnant as a minority of Jews who will not face judgement while the rest will. The bible is clear that all will face judgement: believers to receive their rewards: <<For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad>> (2 Corinthians 5:10), and non believers to be cast into the: <<fiery lake of burning sulphur>> (Revelation 21:8).

It is said that what God has started he would finish and indeed he did deal with those unbelieving Jews with their destruction by the Romans in AD70. Likewise, the work he has started in planting Christian churches and spreading the Gospel to all parts of the world will be completed by God in the fullness of time. And his work is perfect.

Unless the Lord Almighty. The name used for God here is the Lord of Sabaoth, see the ASV and KJV translations, which means the Lord of Hosts, and: <<Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty>> (James 5:4), uses the same name.

Isaiah speaks of a holy seed: <<And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land>> (Isaiah 6:13). It is so far from being an impeachment of the justice and righteousness of God that so many perish and are destroyed; in reality, it is a wonder of divine power and mercy that all are not destroyed, that there are any saved at all in order for any to be left to be that seed; for if God had dealt with them according to their sins, they would have perished along with the rest. This is a great truth that Paul is teaching us in his discourse.

In the face of a continuously rebellious people, God has been more than faithful and just with dealing with them, giving them every opportunity throughout history to return to him by keeping their side of the bargain, which was to worship him only.

In this chapter so far, Paul has been discussing ethnic Israel as the people of Christ albeit according to the flesh. What he is saying builds upon what has gone before.

For example, in Chapter 3 he explained how God had to go ahead with his promised plan even if Israel had proved to be unfaithful. The way God chose to do this was to send Jesus as the faithful Israelite, the Christ through whose death and resurrection God would fulfil his saving purpose. Then in Chapter 7 he described how, through the law, sin had gathered itself to its full power within Israel in order that, through the death of Christ, sin could finally be condemned and dealt with as it deserved. These two chapters taken together, point in the direction of Chapter 9. Here, Israel finds itself called to a particular, and very strange, role in God's purpose; that of being apparently cast away in order that God's powerful plan of salvation can go forwards.

V.b Romans 9:30-11:10 - Israel's rejection of God's saving promises

God's sovereignty is compatible with human responsibility. Israel should have believed the Gospel and trusted in Christ, but the majority refused to do so. Still, God's saving promises will be fulfilled.

V.b.i Romans 9:30-10:21 - Israel's unbelief

Here, Paul brings to a conclusion the true reason why the Gentiles were accepted and the Jews rejected. It was their manner of seeking. While the Gentiles sought God by faith, the Jews did so through works of the law. The first group accepted the Gospel, the second accepted only the ceremonial law. However, salvation is still available only through the free grace of God, for there was nothing in the Gentiles that they would even have known of their sins, or indeed the need for righteousness, other than an in-built sense of right and wrong that everyone has by being created in the image of God. When the Gentiles learned of Christ, many of them embraced him fully by faith, whereas most Jews continued to put their trust in the ceremonial law, thus the rock of salvation for Zion was for them a stumbling block: <<and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare>> (Isaiah 8:14), and: <<So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed>> (Isaiah 28:16), and they fell from grace by their own choice. It is sad that Jesus was seen to be the fall of so many: <<Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against>> (Luke 2:34). Jesus was rejected because he threatened an end to the ceremonial law and the Levitical priesthood, two solid foundations the Jews still hoped in.

Therefore, the unbelieving Jews can have no quarrel with God as they were the first to be offered eternal salvation through the Gospel but declined the gracious offer. If they now perish, their blood will be on their own heads: <<But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" >> (Acts 18:6).

V.b.i.1 Romans 9:30-10:4 - Israel, the nations and the Christ

Paul has now developed two good reasons for his opening assertion that God's word has not failed, despite his countrymen's large scale refusal of the Gospel. His confidence rests in the fact that scripture clearly shows God's purpose of mercy to work through election and rejection; judgement will have reference to behaviour in this life, not so election, and that scripture had foreseen both God's call extending to the Gentiles and the covenant people reduced to a remnant. The tension between his equally firm confidence in God's faithfulness to Israel: <<What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge" >> (Romans 3:3-4), and Israel's rejection and reduction is thereby only partially resolved, and Paul will return to the issue in Chapter 11. But he has been able to lay the foundation for the complete resolution and for the moment he is content.

Oddly enough, throughout the preceding section Paul has never stated explicitly the problem with which he is wrestling, i.e. Israel's failure to believe in the Gospel of Christ Jesus, the Son of God. It was clearly implied from the beginning but never expressed in so many words. Now, at last, Paul exposes the underlying theme and begins to bring it to the surface. More striking still is the way he does so by tying it in to the overall theme of the letter: <<righteousness that is by faith>> (Romans 1:17b). After a silence lasting almost unbroken from the beginning of Chapter 5, the talk of faith and of 'the righteousness of faith' re-emerges with all the force that marked the critical expositions of Romans 3:21-4:25. Following his sustained conclusion of that

exposition in Chapter 5, his exposition of what it meant for sin, death, and the law in Chapters 6-8, and the first stage of his attempt to make sense of Israel's unbelief in this chapter, the two most important themes in his argument at last come together, 'righteousness from faith to faith', and Israel's refusal to believe. Once he has used each to throw light on to the other he will be able to confront with resolution the anguish of Israel's refusal of the word of faith.

³⁰ What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.

Romans 9:30-31

Paul assesses the situation: Gentiles, who were not God's chosen people and did not seek right standing with God, now enjoy that right standing by faith.

Israel pursued right standing with God through the law but failed to achieve it.

A righteousness that is by faith was introduced by Paul in Romans 1:17 <<For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" >>, which is the key theme to this letter.

Who pursued a law of righteousness. It seems clear enough from the train of thought that the law of righteousness is not being disparaged by Paul; it is something worthy of pursuit. Israel's failure is not that it misunderstood righteousness as a law, but that it put the law in place of righteousness, and that it reached as far as the law but failed to reach righteousness, or anything like it, i.e. they had not attained it.

³² Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone."

Romans 9:32

Why not? Why did Israel fail to achieve right standing with God through the law? They did not pursue obedience to the law in humble trust, but tried to make it a means of establishing their own righteousness, i.e. they saw righteousness in terms of law observance through works of the law and not by faith in the law giver.

Such a use of the law led them to stumble over the stone, which was Christ confronting them: <<The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured" >> (Isaiah 8:13-15), and: <<Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for>> (1 Peter 2:7-8), for those attempting to establish their own righteousness see no need to believe in Christ.

³³ As it is written:

"See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall,
and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Romans 9:33

The stumbling over Christ was prophesied in Isaiah 28:16. Those who trust in Christ will not experience end-time shame. This is a passage of scripture that is well known to Christian apologetic from the use elsewhere of Psalm 118:22-23 <<The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes>>. Refer to Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10-11, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, and 1 Peter 2:7. What Paul does in linking the two scriptures from Isaiah Chapter 8 and Isaiah Chapter 28 is to show that Israel's failure to heed the warnings of Isaiah foreshadows Israel's failure to heed the Gospel as well, the consequences of which will be far more dire even than their expulsion from Israel, which lasted for more than 2,600 years when a remnant of the descendants of the ten tribes returned to the newly formed Israel in 1948.

The one who trusts uses the word that is also translated as faith; this is a concept that is rarely used by Isaiah in all of his writings. The trust that Isaiah calls for is wholly of a piece with the faith Paul calls for. Israel at large has found Isaiah's call for trust or faith to be an offense; it is the same reliance on human contrivance which causes his own countrymen to stumble at Paul's Gospel. Just as Isaiah had to think in terms of a remnant who would believe, so Paul finds some comfort for his sorrow that so few of his own people have come to faith in their Messiah; and as the remnant of Isaiah's day could be assured that their trust would not be disappointed, so too the Jews who had come to faith in Christ could be confident that, even though a minority, God would not fail them. If only Israel would heed the warnings and promises of their own scriptures, even today!

By cleverly combining the two passages from Isaiah that talk of the stone, which is meant to signify a foundation stone of the temple, and represents the coming king; and then by adding the third passage saying that his people, those who accept the king, would not be put to shame, Paul portrays Israel's failure to recognise Jesus, either during his ministry or in the time since, as a fulfilment of God's plan and not a thwarting of it. It was something that was there in scripture all the time but could not be recognised in its fullness of meaning for Israel until after it had happened.

What has been happening here is that believing Gentiles have been coming into the family that God had promised to Abraham by his covenant, while many Jews were missing out because they had been going about things the wrong way and did not then have the faith to remain in the true family. It is the faith in Jesus as the Christ, accepting him as the resurrected Lord that is a badge of family membership and not circumcision or the keeping of the law.