

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 15 – Romans

The Jew-Gentile Question

Romans 9-11

Introduction

In Romans 1-8, Paul explained how any person, Jew or Gentile, can be brought back into relationship with God. This emphasis on the gift of God's love for *all people* raised the question: *What happened to God's special plan for the Jewish people as outlined in the Old Testament?* The question was especially pressing as the number of Gentiles flocking into the early church far outpaced the number of Jews. Paul addressed the Jew-Gentile question in Romans 9-11, and in doing so, he wrote about God's sovereign and mysterious ways.

Romans 9: God's Plans Never Fail

Israel: A privileged nation.

"I speak the truth in Christ - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit - I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen" (9:1-5).

Paul longed for his fellow Jews to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. You can feel his heart: *"Cut me off and save them, O God!"* (An impossibility, of course, since God will never cut off one of His own children.) Yet, it reveals his desire for them. Note the wording in 9:5? *"... the Messiah, who is God over all . . ."* Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah – He was **God** in the flesh.

Who's in your top 3? Who is your heart burdened for today? Sharing our faith with others begins in our own hearts. Ask God to show you who is His top 3 for you. Then, pray for them and as God provides opportunities, show them the love of Jesus.

Paul was most grieved because Israel had rejected Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and Son of God. This raised questions that Paul anticipated and answered in the sections that follow.

Does God's plan fail when humans reject it?

"It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. 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." In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls - she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (9:6-13).

Answer: God's plans never fail; rather, they advance in spite of human choices, good or bad. Case in point: God chose to work with a specific line of people within Abraham's clan, and *God's choices were made before children were even born!* Thus, God's plans are not contingent upon human cooperation. The bigger issue: Israel's refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah does not nullify the plans and promises of God made to Abraham and his descendants.

Note: *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (9:13).* God loves all people; but in terms of choosing a specific line of people to advance His plan, God chose Jacob, not Esau. God still loves people who are born into Esau's line. He even gave Israel a specific law to love the Edomites, the descendants of Esau. *"Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you" (Deuteronomy 23:7).*

Is it unfair for God to choose one person or nation over another?

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For 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." Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have

mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden (9:14-18).

Answer: God is “sovereign,” therefore He can do whatever He decides to do. Yes, God is also wise, and just, and holy, and incapable of evil; but Paul’s emphasis in this section is on God’s right to do whatever He wants to do – His sovereignty.

Note: God did “harden Pharaoh’s heart” in the story of the Exodus. But Scripture also records that *Pharaoh hardened his own heart.* We have these two forces working simultaneously – God’s will and man’s will. In Romans 9, Paul is not trying to reconcile the two; rather, he’s emphasizing divine sovereignty to argue that the Jewish rejection of Jesus did not thwart *God’s sovereign will and plan.*

How can God blame people if their decisions are pre-determined by His sovereign will?

One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?” But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? (9:19-21)

Answer: It is futile to debate the “justice of God.” The very notion of *humans finding fault with God* was absurd to Paul. His ways and His will may be mysterious; but if we discuss a God who is unjust, evil, partial, or unfair, then we are denying the very idea of “God.”

What if Israel’s rejection of Jesus advanced God plan?

What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? 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 - even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (9:22-24).

Answer: God uses the ‘closed doors’ of human rejection to open other doors for His purposes to move forward. For example, in Genesis 15:12-16 God promised to move His plan forward for Abraham’s descendants; yet that plan was interwoven with God’s patient endurance of 400 years of Egyptian unbelief *and* disobedience by the Amorites, the inhabitants of the “promised land.” Similarly, Israel’s disobedience in rejecting Jesus led to God’s wider plan to bring salvation to the Gentile world.

Note: Do the doctrines of divine sovereignty and predestination mean that God intentionally predestines people to go to hell (so called ‘double-predestination’)? No! The Bible *never makes God responsible* for people going to hell. Notice the language even here:

“He bore with great patience the objects of His wrath – prepared for destruction” (9:22).

“Objects of His mercy – whom He prepared in advance for glory” (9:23).

God has *great patience* with the objects of His wrath, which implies that these people are *willfully resisting Him*. Further, Paul did **not** write that HE (God) prepared them for destruction. The implication is that they were *preparing themselves for destruction* through their own choices. In contrast, note that the “objects of His mercy” are those that **HE prepared in advance for glory.**” God is actively involved in drawing people to Himself; but He is passive in allowing those who choose to reject Him to do so.

Jewish Rejection/Gentile Acceptance of Jesus. 9:25-29

How does all of this relate to the main question: What about the Jewish nation? When the Jews chose to say NO to Jesus, this only served to confirm God’s choice to open the door to a massive influx of Gentiles who chose to say YES to Jesus. Paul cites O.T. prophets Hosea and Isaiah to show that this was God’s plan all along.

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 . . .” (9:25).

As this 9th chapter concludes, Paul turns the table and allows the emphasis to fall on the *human side of the equation: Israel’s choice to NOT believe in Jesus*, something the O.T. prophets also foresaw.

The Jewish decision to reject God’s mercy.

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame” (9:30-33).

Note that last line: *“The one who believes in him will never be put to shame.”* This is the side of *human responsibility to choose to follow Jesus*. The Jewish people stumbled over “the stumbling stone” - the death of Jesus *for their sins*. They stumbled over the concept of God’s grace and mercy, choosing instead to pursue salvation by means of their own good works and religious rituals. The Gentiles, on the other hand, streamed into the family of God grateful for God’s amazing grace toward sinners.

Summary: God’s plan for the salvation of the world has not been thwarted by Jewish unbelief; instead, His plan is advancing exactly as He intended it to.

Romans 10: Human beings Must Choose

Pursuing salvation according to works, not grace. 10:1-4

“Dear brothers and sisters, the longing of my heart and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved. I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal. For they don’t understand God’s way of making people right with himself. Refusing to accept God’s way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law. For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God.”

The Jewish people of Paul’s day had established a *works system* of salvation. By scrupulously adhering to the 613 commandments they had identified from the Old Testament books, they thought they could achieve salvation *by good works*. Thus, they refused to accept God’s way – the way of grace through the cross of Christ.

This is such a common issue today. People construct their own paths of salvation, their own forms of religion, and then pursue those paths with great devotion. The problem is that God has already determined a path based on His grace, not our works. It is impossible for humans to determine for God the means that will bring about our salvation. God is God, and only He can decide what is necessary and right to rescue us from sin. How about you? Have you accepted God’s amazing grace? Are you standing in His grace every day? Or, are you choosing to chart your own path toward salvation, expecting God to accept you on your terms?

Salvation is closer than we think. 10:5-8

For Moses writes that the law’s way of making a person right with

God requires obedience to all of its commands. But faith's way of getting right with God says, "Don't say in your heart, 'Who will go up to heaven?' (to bring Christ down to earth). And don't say, 'Who will go down to the place of the dead?' (to bring Christ back to life again)." In fact, it says, "The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart."

Moses "went up" the mountain to receive the commandments from God. Moses "brought God down" to the people (figuratively speaking). At Moses neared death, the people of Israel asked: *Now who will go up to the mountain and bring God down to us?* Moses told the people: *You don't need anyone to go up, or to go down to bring God to you. God is near you (see Deuteronomy 30:11-14).* Paul used Moses' words to make the point. The way of salvation is not a difficult climb to the top of a mountain of good works; rather, salvation is as close to each person as the mouth and the heart. For any person, anywhere, salvation is only a prayer away!

How to receive the gift of salvation. 10:9-13

And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."

- Believe in your heart that Jesus is who He said He was.
- Express your heart belief by making a simple verbal confession of your faith (trust) in Him.

God is most concerned with the attitude of our hearts. Do we truly believe (trust) in Jesus as our Savior, or don't we? Once He sees true belief in our hearts, the exact words we use in our "prayer of salvation" is not the issue. It could be a quiet prayer in a church service, or a declaration of faith at the time of one's baptism. It could be, like the thief on the cross, a last-minute appeal to God for salvation (see Luke 23:42). God will hear any words that express a heart of faith in Jesus! How about you? Have you once and for all placed your faith in Jesus as your Savior?

But . . . who will tell them this Good News? 10:14-15

But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”

Many people are living in complete ignorance of the simplicity and beauty of the gift of salvation, usually *because we, the ambassadors of Christ, are not telling them about the Good News!*

Our part is to share the good news in a clear and winsome way. It is **God’s part** to open hearts to understand and respond. It is **their part** to hear and welcome the love of God into their hearts. Sharing your faith is one of the greatest ways to grow in your own walk with Jesus. There are few greater joys than to be used by God to help another person become a child of God. Give it a try! Your feet will be “beautiful” as a messenger carrying God’s word.

Chapter 9 emphasized God’s sovereign choice. Chapter 10 emphasizes the human sides of the equation – human responsibility *to share* the good news **and** *to receive* the good news. Chapter 10 closes with the emphasis falling on man’s responsibility *to respond* (with specific reference again to Israel’s refusal to do so).

Human responsibility to welcome the Good News. 10:16-21

But not everyone welcomes the Good News, for Isaiah the prophet said, “LORD, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ. But I ask, have the people of Israel actually heard the message? Yes, they have: “The message has gone throughout the earth, and the words to all the world.” But I ask, did the people of Israel really understand? Yes, they did, for even in the time of Moses, God said, “I will rouse your jealousy through people who are not even a nation. I will provoke your anger through the foolish Gentiles.” And later Isaiah spoke boldly for God, saying, “I was found by people who were not looking for me. I showed myself to those who were not asking for me.” But regarding Israel, God said, “All day long I opened my arms to them, but they were disobedient and rebellious.”

Paul says that his own Jewish countrymen were resisting the “open arms” of a God who was appealing to them “all day long.”

Meanwhile, the Gentiles were streaming in to the kingdom, through faith in Jesus. Israel's problem was *a stubborn heart*. They were unwilling to consider with a humble, open mind the idea that Jesus was their Messiah-God, their Savior. Paul knew of this problem personally because he was once the embodiment of it. Yet, now that he saw the beauty and simplicity of salvation through Christ, he longed, he prayed, he preached, he wrote . . . with the sincere hope that many more of his fellow Jews would find salvation in Christ.

Romans 11: The Future for Jews and Gentiles

A remnant from Israel is being saved. 11:1-6

I ask, then, has God rejected his own people, the nation of Israel? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected his own people, whom he chose from the very beginning. Do you realize what the Scriptures say about this? Elijah the prophet complained to God about the people of Israel and said, "LORD, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." And do you remember God's reply? He said, "No, I have 7,000 others who have never bowed down to Baal!" It is the same today, for a few of the people of Israel have remained faithful because of God's grace—his undeserved kindness in choosing them. And since it is through God's kindness, then it is not by their good works. For in that case, God's grace would not be what it really is—free and undeserved.

The majority of Paul's Jewish countrymen had rejected God's offer of salvation through Jesus. Yet, the fact that there were *some* Jews who accepted Jesus shows that God had not completely rejected the people He chose to play such a special place in His plan.

Israel's hardness of heart. 11:7-10

"So this is the situation: Most of the people of Israel have not found the favor of God they are looking for so earnestly. A few have—the ones God has chosen—but the hearts of the rest were hardened."

While a remnant of Jews were being saved (still the situation today), the sad fact was that the hearts of most Israelites were unreceptive to the message of Jesus. When people say "No," to God time and time again, God may confirm them in their hardness of heart. Paul was saying that this was happening for the nation Israel – their hearts were being hardened by God as they continued to say "No" to Jesus.

God is not finished with Israel. 11:11-16

“Did God’s people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves. Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it. I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. God has appointed me as the apostle to the Gentiles. I stress this, for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them.”

In spite of their rejection of Jesus, *Israel has not been rejected by God.* Paul anticipates a day when the Jews will repent of their rejection of Jesus. They will turn to Christ in massive numbers, resulting in a huge blessing being poured out upon the whole Earth. (See Zechariah 10:12-14 for a prophecy concerning the day of Israel’s repentance.)

Israel to be grafted in again. 11:17-24

“But some of these branches from Abraham’s tree—some of the people of Israel—have been broken off. And you Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God’s special olive tree. But you must not brag about being grafted in to replace the branches that were broken off . . . those branches were broken off because they didn’t believe in Christ, and you are there because you do believe . . . But if you stop trusting, you also will be cut off. And if the people of Israel turn from their unbelief, they will be grafted in again, for God has the power to graft them back into the tree. You, by nature, were a branch cut from a wild olive tree. So if God was willing to do something contrary to nature by grafting you into his cultivated tree, he will be far more eager to graft the original branches back into the tree where they belong.”

God’s plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles is pictured under the figure of two olive trees – a cultivated tree (Israel) and a wild tree (Gentiles). The roots of the special tree are the promises God made to Abraham and his children (the Jews). The natural branches of the special olive tree are the Jews. Those natural branches were “broken off” because of their rejection of Jesus. The branches from the “wild olive tree” that were “grafted in” to the cultivated tree are the

Gentiles. The Gentiles have been grafted in by the gardener (God) so that they are now drawing on the blessing (roots) of the special olive tree (drawing on the promises made to Abraham). Yet, these ‘wild branches’ should not become arrogant about their present privilege, because if God can graft wild branches (Gentiles) into the special tree, He can certainly graft back in the original, natural branches (the Jews) into the special tree. And this is precisely what He will do at some future point.

The overall message? Gentiles, be grateful for your present privilege and place in God’s plan. Never become arrogant toward Israel, especially during the time of their hardness of heart. God will, someday, bring the natural branches back into the tree. Why? Because God cannot break His promises to His people . . .

God’s Promises to Israel will never fail. 11:25-32

“I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say, “The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem, and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness. And this is my covenant with them, that I will take away their sins.” Many of the people of Israel are now enemies of the Good News, and this benefits you Gentiles. Yet they are still the people he loves because he chose their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For God’s gifts and his call can never be withdrawn.”

Someday, God will come and “he will turn Israel away from ungodliness.” He will “take away their sins.” All because God remains faithful to fulfill His ancient promises to these people.

When will this future restoration of Israel occur? It will most likely occur during the culminating events of the current period of human history (the “great tribulation”) *and* in the following period (the millennial kingdom). God’s original plan for Israel was for them to be His nation of priests calling the world to Himself. They will fulfill that role someday, when they are fully restored spiritually. The O.T. prophets universally pointed forward to the day of Israel’s restoration (eg. Micah 4:2 and Isaiah 2:3).

As Paul closes Romans 9-11, he knows he has been dealing with some weighty issues concerning the way God’s plan is unfolding.

He concludes by worshipping God with a doxology of praise, acknowledging that God's ways are beyond our understanding.

God's ways are unfathomable! 11:33-36

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

God's ways and wisdom are “unfathomable.” That word is important. In ancient ships there was a person responsible for measuring the depth (fathoms) of the water so that the captain would not run aground. He would tap the side of the boat with a wooden stick and listen for the sound to echo back up from the bottom of the sea. When the ship was out in deep waters, the sound would descend, but not be heard echoing back up. The man would say to the captain: We are at “unfathomable” depths.

When it comes to God's overarching plan for the ages, His dealings with Jews and Gentiles, the interaction of His sovereign will with human choices . . . and even His ways with us today, there are times when we have to say: *God, I don't fully comprehend all of this! I'm in over my head. Your ways are unfathomable.*

But the big picture in Romans 9-11 is simple: God knows exactly what He is doing with Jews and Gentiles. We can let Him be God . . . while we focus on being His humble servants, caught up in the mysterious and often unfathomable plans He is working out in our world.

Trusting God when you don't understand His ways. This is one of the most difficult, yet important aspects of our journey with God. This was the lesson Job struggled with, in the time of his sudden, unexplainable suffering. He wanted to understand the WHY behind his situation, but the only answer he was given was this: I am God, that's why. I think of the t-shirt that mom's sometimes wear so that the children who are shouting, Why? Why? Why? can be reminded of the bottom-line in the home: "I'm the MOM, that's why!" The message of Job (and of Romans 9-11) is just this: Trust His heart even when you can't make sense of His ways.