



Last Sunday I was out of town visiting my dad on his 85th birthday, so I watched our worship service online. One of the ushers texted me, saying, “Today’s count is the highest since pre-Covid...” He then gave two thumbs up and a smiley face. I replied, “Praise the Lord! I should go out of town more often!” I love the fact that our life as a church does not revolve around any one person except our Lord Jesus Christ! As I tuned into the Livestream, it was a joy to hear you sing, read Scripture, pray, and to hear Pastor Mike preach the final portion of Romans 8. How wonderful it is to know that nothing in the past, present or future – indeed, nothing in all creation – “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39). Chapter 8 ends on a spiritual high as Paul summarizes and celebrates the great gospel truths that he has presented in the previous chapters.

But at the start of chapter nine Paul’s celebration turns to sorrow as he considers the spiritual condition of his fellow Jews. This leads to a lengthy discussion on God’s sovereign plan and work in salvation. This theme runs to the end of chapter 11, but today we will cover just the first thirteen verses of chapter 9. Please follow along in your copy of God’s Word as I read Romans 9:1-13 (p. 889 in the pew Bible):

I am speaking the truth in Christ — I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit — ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. ⁹ For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad – in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls – ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

- Romans 9:1-13

Father in heaven, like Nicodemus we come to your Word with many questions. This is good. But please don't let our desire for information eclipse our need for transformation. We ask in Jesus' name that your Holy Spirit help us to understand your Word correctly, believe it entirely, and respond to it wholeheartedly. Amen.

Earlier this week Mike Reeves, President of Union School of Theology, tweeted, "Beware of undevotional theology and untheological devotion." That is, our study of God should always unite our heads and hearts in worship. Jesus said,

"The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."

- John 4:24

Jesus is emphasizing "theological devotion" – worshipping God "in spirit and truth." He says that the Father is "seeking such people to worship him." Jesus goes on to say, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). God's sovereignty in salvation is the theme of Romans 9-11. This theme is introduced by Paul not in a merely intellectual way but also in a deeply emotional way.

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

- Romans 9:1-2

Here, Paul doesn't explicitly tell us why he is experiencing such sorrow over his fellow Jews, but he does tell us at the start of the next chapter, in Romans 10:1: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they might be saved." Paul is in agony because at the vast majority of Jews are *not* saved.

**PAUL'S ANGUISH:
Most Jews are not saved
(vv. 1-5)**

Paul expresses his sorrow, insisting that he's not lying but telling the truth. He says that God and his own conscience bear witness to this fact. Why does Paul go to such lengths to prove his sincerity? Because he has already said some hard things to the Jews, particularly in chapter 2, and there's more to come. This may lead some people to think that Paul despises them. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

Paul so deeply longs for their salvation that he says, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers." As a believer in Christ, Paul knows that nothing can separate him from the love of God. But his compassion

and concern for his fellow Jews is so great, that he is willing to undergo the greatest misery to do them the greatest good (Matthew Henry).

We see this kind of self-sacrificing love occasionally throughout Scripture. Judah offered himself as a slave in place of his brother Benjamin (Gen. 44:3). Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the people of Israel, saying, “please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Ex. 32:32). As David mourned the loss of his son Absalom, he cried, “If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33). But the greatest example of self-sacrificing love is seen in Jesus, who really did undergo the greatest misery to do us the greatest good.

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

- Galatians 3:13

As a believer, it was impossible for Paul to be accursed, to be cut off from Christ. But Christ himself was cut off for our sake. Scripture clearly says,

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

-- Isaiah 53:5-6

Paul had come to know the love of God in Christ, and he wanted others to as well. In verses 3-5, Paul shares two reasons for his deep concern for his fellow Jews:

a. His relation to them (v. 3)

In verse 3 Paul refers to them as “my kinsmen according to the flesh” – “my brothers and sisters, my own flesh and blood” (CSB). In Philippians 3, Paul describes himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5). If Paul would have gone on Ancestry.com, the records would show that he was 100% Jew. He loved his nation and his people. Even though Christ had called Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8), he continued to hope and pray for the salvation of his fellow Jews.

We can understand this, can't we? When we pray for the salvation of others, we start with our own family. From there our concentric circles of concern expand to include our close friends, our neighbors, our colleagues and classmates, our fellow citizens.

But do we care for them as Paul cared for his fellow Jews? Can we say in good conscience, with God as our witness, that we have “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in our hearts for family members and fellow citizens who don’t know Christ? Paul was filled with sorrow for his fellow Jews – not only because of his relation to them, but also because of their relation to God.

b. Their relation to God (vv. 4-5)

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

- Romans 9:4-5

In the previous chapter Paul celebrated our spiritual privileges as believers in Christ. Now Paul recounts the many blessings that God bestowed on the people of Israel.

- “the adoption”: not in terms of eternal redemption, but in terms of a temporal deliverance when God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. God had Moses tell Pharaoh, “This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son ... Let my son go, so he may worship me” (Ex. 4:22-23a). Later, Moses reminded the people of Israel, “You are the sons of the Lord your God” (Deut. 14:1) and “you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son” (Deut. 1:31). God’s fatherly affection for Israel came with special privileges, even though it didn’t always end with the redemption of individual Israelites.
- “the glory”: This refers to the visible manifestation of God’s presence in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and then eventually the temple (2 Chronicles 7:1).
- “the covenants”: God made a covenant with Abraham, the father of Israel, promising to bless him and make him a blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). God reiterated these promises to Isaac and Jacob. God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai, promising to bless them if they obeyed him. God made a covenant with David, promising to establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13).
- “the giving of the law”: The Lord revealed himself to his people through his Word. The psalmist rejoiced in this, saying, “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the Lord” (Ps. 147:19-20).
- “the worship”: This refers the system God laid out for showing him thanks, for receiving his forgiveness.
- “the promises”: These were conveyed through the various covenants, which we’ve already mentioned – promises to bless Abraham and his descendants.

- “the patriarchs”: On several occasions, God referred to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:15). This self-designation emphasized the special privilege that Israel enjoyed as God’s chosen people (Deut. 7:6).
- “the Christ”: This title is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” The ultimate goal of God’s selection of the Jews as his chosen people was to produce the Messiah, Jesus, “who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

The biggest blessing, the greatest gift that God gave to Israel was his own beloved Son. The New Testament gospel writer Matthew tells us that Jesus’ birth fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14).

Yet despite all their privileges, the Jews missed the way of salvation. John tells us that Jesus “came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11).

The history of Israel reminds us that spiritual privileges are no guarantee of salvation. Think of all the privileges that we enjoy. Whereas Israel had portions of Scripture, we have the whole revelation of God – all sixty-six books of the Bible in multiple translations. We have the freedom to gather for worship, to sing any number of hymns (hundreds, even thousands of them!) to God. We get to hear God’s word preached in church, online, pretty much whenever and wherever we want. Yet none of these privileges guarantee salvation. They only increase our accountability to God. “For to whom much is given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). “The question is the same today as it was for Israel: Will we believe what we receive? Will we use these resources to strengthen our faith?”¹

Despite all of their spiritual privileges, most Jews had not received God’s salvation. This caused “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in Paul’s heart. But it also raised a crucial theological question: *Since God’s promise of salvation was given to Israel, but this salvation with all its gospel blessings now belongs to the church, does this mean that God’s promises to Israel have failed?*

This is crucial question, because *if God cannot keep his promises to Israel, then how can we be sure that God will keep his promises to us?* Paul anticipates this question and answers it emphatically in Romans 9:6, saying, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed....” It’s in this truth that Paul finds great assurance.

**PAUL’S ASSURANCE:
God’s Word has not failed
(vv. 6-13)**

This is Paul’s thesis for chapters 9-11, and he supports it with four main arguments:

¹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans*. Reformed Expository Commentary, eds. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2021), p. 314.

- 1) God never promised to save every single Jew (9:6-29).
- 2) The Jews themselves are responsible for failing to believe (9:30 – 10:21).
- 3) God's promises to Israel are even now being fulfilled in a *remnant*, of Jewish Christians (11:1-10).
- 4) God will yet save *all Israel* (11:12-32).

Paul's purpose in presenting these arguments throughout the next three chapters is to show that "God's promises to his people Israel – when correctly understood – remain fully intact."²

But I want to give you a fair warning before we proceed any further. The rest of Romans 9 is one of the least popular passages in Scripture because Paul defends God's character by explaining the doctrine of election, which teaches that before the world was created, God chose who would receive salvation. Some think this is unfair of God – an objection that Paul anticipates and answers later in the chapter. But for now, I urge you to approach this section with a humble heart and open mind, allowing Scripture to shape your thinking. If you do, you will come to see "God's purpose of election" as a cause for profound gratitude, humility, and joy.

Today we'll dip our toe into this doctrine and dive into it more deeply next week. Remember the main thesis of chapters 9:11: *God's word has not failed*. After stating his thesis at the beginning of verse 6, Paul defends it with his first argument, which he summarizes in the second half of verse 6, saying, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." This is the same point that Jesus made in John 8 to the Jews of his day. Paul is drawing a distinction between two Israels: a *physical* Israel, based on biological descent, and a *spiritual* Israel, based on God's sovereign choice.

Paul uses two illustrations from Israel's history to prove his point.

a. God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael (vv. 7-9)

⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.⁹ For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son."
- Romans 9:7-9

Both Ishmael and Isaac were Abraham's sons, but God chose Isaac and his offspring as the ones through whom God's promises to Abraham would be fulfilled. In both quotations – the one in verse 7 from Genesis 21:12, and the one in verse 9

² Douglas J. Moo, "Romans." *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edition, edited by G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson and R. T. France (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994, reprinted 2010), p. 1142.

from Genesis 18:14 – God emphasized his sovereign choice in determining who would be his children – “it was to be the children born in accordance with his promise to Abraham and by divine intervention, not just those born by natural means as in the case of Ishmael.”³ There was nothing miraculous or supernatural about Ishmael’s birth, since Hagar was young and able to have children. But the birth of Isaac occurred when Abraham and his wife Sarah were both too old to have children. Isaac’s birth was a direct result of God’s divine intervention.

But, no doubt, some who are familiar with the births of Ishmael and Isaac might say, “Yes, but they still had different mothers. Ishmael was born to Hagar, the slave woman, whereas Isaac was born to Sarah, the free woman – Abraham’s first and primary wife. So, would make sense that Isaac would be the one through whom God’s promises to Abraham would be fulfilled.” So, in verses 10-13, Paul points to another, even stronger, illustration:

b. God’s choice of Jacob over Esau (vv. 10-13)

¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls – ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” ¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

- Romans 9:10-13

In this case, both boys had the same father and the same mother and were even conceived at the same time! The quotation in verse 12 (from Gen. 25:23) points to God’s sovereign choice. The younger serving the older was the natural order of things in the ancient Near East. But by reversing this order, God made it clear that it was *his* choice, not the culture of the day or the character of the boys, that determined the outcome – “in order that God’s purpose of election might stand.”

In verse 13, Paul quotes Malachi 1:2-3, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Some try to soften the word “hate” by saying that it means “to love less” (cf. Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37). While this may be one possible interpretation, it’s interesting to look at Paul’s quote from Malachi in its original context. It comes after Israel questions God’s love for them. Here’s how the book of Malachi begins – I’ll read just the first four verses:

¹ This is the message that the Lord gave to Israel through the prophet Malachi.

² “I have always loved you,” says the Lord.
But you retort, “Really? How have you loved us?”

³ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 377.

And the Lord replies, “This is how I showed my love for you: I loved your ancestor Jacob, ³ but I rejected his brother, Esau, and devastated his hill country. I turned Esau’s inheritance into a desert for jackals.”

⁴ Esau’s descendants in Edom may say, “We have been shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins.”

But the Lord of Heaven’s Armies replies, “They may try to rebuild, but I will demolish them again. Their country will be known as ‘The Land of Wickedness,’ and their people will be called ‘The People with Whom the Lord Is Forever Angry.’

- Malachi 1:1-4

The bottom line is that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. God did this out of his own sovereign choice while they were both still in the womb, before either of them had done anything good or bad. Paul uses the births of Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau to illustrate one primary point:

Salvation depends ultimately on God’s calling and nothing else.

This doesn’t mean that humans are a “blank slate” and bear no responsibility for their choices. Paul will bring people’s responsibility to believe later in the discussion. But here he is emphasizing God’s sovereignty in salvation. If you have believed in Christ, it is only because God chose to bestow the blessings of salvation on you. This should produce profound humility and gratitude in your heart.

It may well be that God is calling some of you to salvation today. The *external* call of God goes out to everyone. He commands all people to repent and believe the gospel – that Jesus died for your sins, was buried, and raised on the third day, just as the Scriptures said – so that you might be forgiven and have eternal life through him. That’s the *external* call of God. The *effectual* call of God is different from the external call in that it not only issues the invitation, but it also insures the response. Those whom God chooses to save will repent of their sins, they will believe the gospel, they will embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

If you are deciding whether or not to put your faith in Christ and follow him, don’t waste time wondering if you are elect. Come to Jesus, and you’ll know that you are.

If you’re a Christian, this text ought to produce at least two responses in you: *humility before the Lord*, and *a heart for the lost*. The doctrine of election humbles us for it shows that the ultimate reason that we are saved is because God set his love on us and chose to save us – long before we were ever born or did anything good or bad. This should produce profound humility in us and gratitude toward God.

This text should also produce a heart for the lost. In a sermon from several years ago, John Piper explained that if we’re not careful, we can experience a disconnect between a true doctrine (God’s absolute sovereignty) and make it incompatible with

an appropriate emotion (unceasing anguish for the lost). What should we do if we share Paul's doctrine but not his anguish? John Piper suggests seven steps:

1. **Never forget their plight.** Remember the awful reality of entering eternity without Christ.
2. **Meditate on Christ's sufficiency.** Think about the power of the cross to provide full cleansing from sin. Read Paul's own testimony in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, where he said, "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' – and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life." God saved the worst to show us that there is hope for the rest, even if we think they're too evil.
3. **Meditate on the Spirit's convicting and drawing power.** Don't be pessimistic about the power of God to change sinners. My uncle John shared a great testimony in this regard this past week as he recounted a fishing trip that he took with his brother, my uncle Harry, over forty years ago. He wrote,

"For many years, brother Harry and I would talk about going deep-sea fishing together at Ocean City, MD. Finally, we made the decision and did it. When we arrived at the Ocean City boat dock, there were two other men (both brothers) who would be fishing with us, and my first thought was that with all four of us fishing (two at a time from the two boat chairs), Harry and I wouldn't be able to do as much fishing as we wanted, but it didn't turn out to be the case at all.

The two brothers got on the boat with their keg of beer; it was about 97 degrees out; and the two of them were drunk and passed out by 11:00 a.m.! After reeling in a nice bluefish ... I laughed to myself thinking that I had been disappointed that I wouldn't be able to fish enough with all four of us fishermen on the boat. In resuming fishing, it was the only time I can recall when I hoped that I wouldn't hook another fish until I had time to recuperate from the last one. We caught 37 blue fish in total, weighing 13-19 lbs. Talk about being exhausted!

The two other brothers finally awoke from their stupor when it was about time to get to the dock. But I had the opportunity to witness to one of the brothers, realizing that he might still be too drunk to understand! When the boat returned to the dock, I gave the two brothers gospel tracts with my home address stamped on the back of them.

Many years later, I received a letter from the man to whom I had witnessed, and he said that he had been meaning to write to me years earlier saying that each of them had trusted Christ as their Savior, and now their wives and children had also trusted Christ!!! That's been years ago, but I can well remember the joy in my heart, not only because of their salvation and the Lord's allowing me to learn about it, but also because it really struck me how great, powerful, and sovereign the Lord was throughout this entire ordeal! So, it has been a good reminder ever since then to seize the various opportunities and leave the results with the Lord."

4. **Think of your joy at the conversion of one lost soul.** Imagine the joy that you'd experience over one sinner turning to Christ through your prayer and witness. Paul called his converts his "hope and joy and crown of boasting before the Lord at his coming" (1 Thess. 2:19). Let your imagination grasp the joy of being used by God to bring a person from death to eternal life.
5. **Think of God's amazing grace to you in Christ.** The more you get a sense of God's love for you in spite of your unworthiness, the more you will seek to show compassion for others, without respect to their worthiness.
6. **Act on your loving desires.** Act on whatever loving desire you already have, even if it seems pathetically small, and it will help your compassion to grow.
7. **Pray for God to increase your love for the lost.** In expressing his prayer for believers in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, Paul said, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men." Love for all people is not natural to us. It is a gift of God's grace. Could it be that we have not because we ask not?⁴

⁴ Justin Taylor, "7 Practical Steps to Cultivate a Heart for the Lost." The Gospel Coalition, 29 October 2012 [online]. Retrieved on 5 March 2022 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/7-practical-steps-to-cultivate-a-heart-for-the-lost/>.