

Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 1 of 9)

Believing in God's Promises Despite Israel's Unbelief

Romans 9:1-13

Mark Vroegop

1 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 (ESV)

The theme of the book of Romans is righteousness – God's righteousness, human unrighteousness, and the righteousness that is given by God to those who put their faith in Him. Romans 1:16-17 provides the best summary:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Romans 1:16–17 (ESV)

Since January of last year, we have looked at Romans 1-8, seeing the Revealing of Righteousness (1:1-3:20), the Gift of Righteousness (3:21-4:25), the Hope of Righteousness (5:1-7:25), and the Promise of Righteousness (8:1-8:39). Today we begin a nine-week series examining Romans 9-11 under the banner “The Mystery of Righteousness.”

I have chosen the word “mystery” intentionally because I believe that these three chapters contain the most challenging and awe-inspiring passages in the entire Bible. Some sections of Scripture are hard to understand, and others are incredibly beautiful. But Romans 9-11 is unique in that it is both mind-boggling and mind-blowing. If you walk carefully through this text, you will find yourself saying “What?” only to say “Wow!” a few verses later or maybe in the same verse. This section of scripture has the potential to change how you see yourself, the world, and especially God.

How to Approach Romans 9-11

Before we get into our text today, let me give you some pastoral counsel on how to approach these three chapters:

1. Remember that the God of Romans 8 is also the God of Romans 9. Be careful that your view of God is biblically balanced, keeping the beauty of Romans 8 in your heart as you wrestle with the mystery of Romans 9 in your head. Resist the tendency to only view God through one chapter of the Bible.

2. Be willing to allow the Bible to shape and reshape your vision of God. There are many things that inform our understanding of who God is and what He is like, but we must allow the Bible to shape our thinking even if it is uncomfortable or messy. Do your best to submit your view to the authority of the Bible rather than making the Bible submit to your view.

3. Embrace the tension of hard texts. Passages like these create dissonance as new categories are formed, old assumptions are dismantled, and new questions arise. This is often a painful process, and yet it is important to embrace the fact that there are things about God and His ways which are beyond our ability to fully understand. Do not be dismayed by the tension. Use it as your servant to humble you and to motivate a new pursuit of God.

4. Take the long view when it comes to deep and challenging truths in the Bible. Remember that sanctification is a life-long journey, and this sermon series is a part of that process. I will not be able to answer all of your questions, and the subjects in these chapters are worthy of a lifetime of humble, God-centered, Scripture-fed pursuit. So let's be patient with ourselves and with each other because we all come to these texts with background, history, and context. And let's resolve to keep seeking the Lord even as we struggle to understand certain truths.

Romans 9-11 is hard. But it is not bad. It is challenging, but it is also glorious. God has us studying this text at this moment in your life and in this moment in our church's history for a reason. Jonathan Edwards said this about hard texts: "I am convinced that there are many things in religion and the Scriptures that are made difficult on purpose to try men, and to exercise their faith and scrutiny, and to hinder the proud and self-sufficient."¹

So let's examine these chapters with humility, expectancy, and hope. My prayer is that this section of scripture will be one of your favorites by the time we are done with our study, and I am praying that you will see God in new and powerful ways through our journey. Let's get started.

The Problem: Israel's Unbelief (vv. 1-5)

In order to appreciate the teaching of Romans 9-11, you have to understand the problem that is behind these three chapters. Simply stated, the problem is the fact that God's chosen people Israel rejected the Messiah, and they are estranged from God despite what God promised. If God made promises to Israel, and if those promises never happened, then how can God be trusted to keep any promise?

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<http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbj9uZXdwaGlsby9nZXRvYmplY3QucGw/Yy4xMj00jE6MTgxLndqZW8=>

The beauty of Romans 8 was how loaded it was with promise after promise. Paul told us that God is for us (8:31), that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (8:34), and that we are more than conquerors (8:37). What's more, these promises were anchored in words like "those whom he foreknew he also predestined" (8:29). Chapter 8 was filled with beautiful, sovereign hope.

Paul anticipates someone raising a skeptical hand after he has completed Romans 8 and asking: "This is great stuff, Paul, but what about Israel? After all, they were the chosen people of God, and they killed their own Messiah. The prophets told about a great spiritual awakening in Israel, and that has not happened. Quite the reverse, actually. So, how do we know that Romans 8 is even true?" What's more, Paul seems to anticipate that the Roman Gentiles might begin looking down their spiritual noses at the Jews and think the Jewish rejection means that God is finished with His people. They might think that God has replaced Israel with Gentile Christians.

Romans 9-11 answers this question in three sections:

- 9:1-29 – Despite Israel's unbelief, the Word of God has not failed (9:6), but it has been and will be effective due to the sovereign will of God.
- 9:30-11:10 – Gentiles and the remnant in Israel are both saved by faith, while those who trusted in works were hardened.
- 11:11-11:36 – The Gentile inclusion will lead to the inclusion of Israel² again (11:26).

Thomas Schreiner summarizes the message of these chapters beautifully:

*God first chose Israel to be his people when they were a despised minority (Deut. 7). In the New Testament era Israel anticipated receiving the blessings of the coming age as God's chosen and favored people. God turned the tables on Israel by choosing despised Gentiles to be his own, showing that salvation was due to his mercy alone and not to any human prerogatives or distinctives. How astonishing it was to see the Gentiles grafted into the olive tree of Israel, the chosen people of God. Yet now that the Gentiles are grafted in, they face precisely the same temptation. They were inclined to boast that God chose them over Israel. . . . God will continue, however, to work in unexpected ways. It seems that he is finished with the Jews and has set his love upon the Gentiles only. But now Paul reveals that he has promised to save "all Israel" at the end of history.*³

So Israel's unbelief, as it relates to the promises of God, is the central issue in these three chapters, and the first five verses introduce this problem by highlighting Paul's sorrow and the Jewishness of God's historical plan.

Verses 1-3a features some emotionally charged language as Paul describes the burden that he has in his heart for Israel. He wants the believers in Rome to know that what he is about to share with them is important and true. That is why he talks about truthfulness twice ("I am speaking the truth . . . I am not lying") and why he appeals to Christ and the Holy Spirit. Paul knows what is on the line here.

² While my view takes "Israel" to mean ethnic Israel, there are others who take this to refer to the church / spiritual Israel. Both are compatible with orthodox, evangelical Christianity.

³ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

Additionally, he communicates the depth of his pain regarding the spiritual hardness of Israel. Paul says that he has “great sorrow,” “unceasing anguish,” and he wishes that he could be personally sacrificed or even cursed in order to reach Israel. In the same way that Moses interceded for his people and was willing to be blotted out of the book of life in Exodus 32, so Paul was heartbroken over the waywardness of his people.

Verses 3a-5 ground the problem in ethnic Israel. Paul is burdened by the nation of Israel’s rejection of Christ and that is why he uses terms like “my brothers,” “my kinsmen,” and “Israelites.” The chosen people of God are cut off from Christ, and it is tragic because of all the spiritual blessings afforded to them. Paul lists six blessings in verse 4 which could be grouped into two sets of three: 1) adoption, glory, and covenants; 2) the law, the worship, and the promises. The grief in Paul is due to the fact that God has chosen Israel, blessed Israel, and has promised a glorious spiritual future for her, and it has tragically not happened.

In verse five Paul looks back to the history of Israel with the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the ones first to receive Israel’s promises. Then he ends his list with the climax of tragedy: the rejection of the Messiah. The name *Christ* means “anointed one.” To say “the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever” is to clearly identify the Messianic problem here. The Jewish people, despite all the blessings of God and despite the Messiah coming from their own people, have turned away from God despite all the divine promises.

However, it is even worse. The Jewish people rejected their Messiah, who was also God. They rejected God’s deliverance, their Messiah, and God Himself. And that is why Israel’s unbelief is not only tragic but also a huge problem. God’s chosen people have been cut off, and they are under judgment.

The unbelief of Israel despite the promises of God is a problem because it calls into question whether the other promises of God can really be trusted.

Is it encouraging to you that Paul would address such a bold problem? I hope it is, because there are sometimes that believers in Jesus are afraid to ask hard questions about their faith or what the Bible teaches. What’s more, there are times when privately you feel like Christianity is intellectually inferior and as if belief is completely divorced from reason. Yet, Paul tackles a big problem straight on. He does not shy away from it but addresses the issue directly. There is a solution to the problem of Israel’s unbelief.

The Solution: A Remnant for Now (vv. 6-8)

Paul’s solution to the problem of Israel’s unbelief is found in 9:6, and this verse is the thematic verse for all of Romans 9-11. I would recommend that you underline this verse or make a note of it because it unlocks these chapters and builds a bridge to Romans 8.

⁶ *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel . . . (Romans 9:6)*

Notice two things about this verse. First, Paul rejects the notion that the Word of God has failed. The promises made to Israel about her spiritual restoration have not come true yet. That is true. But to link this reality with a failure on the part of God’s Word is to go too far.

Second, the solution that Paul offers is simply stated in verse 6: “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” In other words, if one merely looks at the national picture, God’s promises would seem to have failed. But as is so often the case in the biblical history, God has preserved a remnant within Israel – an “Israel” within Israel.

Romans 11:1-6 is a great parallel text here that makes this point very clear:

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” ⁴ But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. Romans 11:1–6 (ESV)

So Paul’s solution in this immediate context is to appeal to a remnant of believing Israelites who are the true Israel. Paul identifies that being an Israelite is not just a matter of ethnicity, but that belonging to the “people of God” involves belief. In other words, the national rejection of Israel does not mean that God’s word failed since there were Israelites who did believe.

To reinforce this “Israel within Israel”(v. 6b) model, Paul makes four important statements which all say the same thing (and sometimes trade metaphors!):

- **v. 7 – “not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring”** – Paul reiterates through Abraham the point, in principle, that not all of Abraham’s children are his “offspring” or the recipients of the promise of God.
- **v. 7 – “Through Isaac shall you offspring be named”** – This statement clarifies that while Abraham had two biological sons, Ishmael and Isaac, only Isaac was the actual offspring.
- **v. 8 – “This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children God”** – By implication, then being physically born into the nation of Israel did not equal being a child of God.
- **v. 8 – “But the children of the promise are counted as offspring”** – Here is the conclusion and why Paul can talk about an Israel within Israel: Because children of promise are the true offspring.

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is turning the focus from Israel’s national rejection of the Messiah to individual Israelites who believed. The solution to the problem is that “offspring” never meant every offspring and that ethnicity was never the ground for faithfulness.

Israel’s trust in her chosen status and her ethnicity was a central cause of her unfaithfulness. Israel failed to realize that God was looking for something more than the trapping of Jewish heritage. Romans 2 made this point very clear:

⁴ Or do you {Jews} presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans 2:28–29)

To combat the charge that God's word has failed, Paul takes the promises of God out of the national context and sets it in an individual application. Paul separates the application of the promises to the nation from the application of the promises to individuals – an Israel within Israel. And he does this in order to address the problem of Israel's unbelief and the influx of the Gentiles.

The rest of Romans 9-11 is an explanation of the individual redemptive focus (9:14-10:4), the picture of the Gentiles being grafted into the people of God (10:5-11:24), and the salvation of Israel (11:25-11:36). At first reading Romans 9 would seem to indicate that God is completely done with Israel, but that oversimplification is why (in my view) Paul writes about their "full inclusion" (11:12) and that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26).

The wording of my second point is carefully chosen: "A Remnant for Now." I think that Paul is talking about a remnant at the beginning of Romans 9, but that he is looking forward to the fulfillment of the prophetic eschatological vision of Israel as something yet to come. In other words, God's word has not failed because of Israel's unbelief because 1) "Not all who descended from Israel are Israel" (9:6) and 2) "... a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved" (11:25b-26).

The solution to Israel's unbelief is to see that God is working in real but often in non-descript ways, He is not finished with His plan, and there is a sovereign plan behind it all. And that leads us to the final truth that undergirds all of this: divine election.

The Comfort: Divine Election (vv. 9-13)

Now I do not know what kind of emotions the word "election" creates for you, but I have intentionally linked it with the word comfort in this final point because that is why Paul is talking about it. There are many tensions, disagreements, and unanswerable questions when it comes to this subject. But it is important to start where Paul does.

The aim of verses 9-13 is to show that the promise is invincible because of God's sovereign plan in election. Election is talked about as comfort that God will always work out His plan to save His people.

Verse 9 begins this argument by referring back to the promise that God made to Abraham regarding a son. God chose Abraham (Gen. 12) and promised to bless the world through him (Gen. 17). God's choice of Abraham and the miraculous birth of Isaac, while Abraham and Sarah were beyond the age of child-birth, was due to God's grace. So the sovereignty of God or divine election is not a new subject in Romans 9. It is running through the entire story of the people of God.

God chose Abraham apart from his worthiness or his works. God made promises to Abraham that were not conditional on Abraham's works. God chose, God promised, and God delivered. Don't miss the fact that God, God, God is the focus here. The beauty of this section is the vision of God that we see.

Verse 10 unpacks this theme of election apart from works. Or to state it positively: election based upon God's grace alone. To make this point very clear, Paul cites the historical example of Isaac's twin boys – Jacob and Esau. If you skip ahead to 9:12, you will find the promise from Genesis 25 that Rebecca received while the twins were still in her womb: "the older will serve the younger." And if you read verse 13, you will see a challenging text: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." This is a quote from Malachi 1:2-3 where God

identifies his choice of Jacob to be father of the Jewish people while Esau is a type of immoral people unable to embrace true repentance. To say that God loved Jacob and hated Esau does not mean that God “hated” Esau like we might sinfully hate someone. Rather, as in Luke 14:26, it means to choose one person over another.

Now if in your mind you are asking, “How is that fair?” I would tell you that is a great question and you will need to come back for the next two weeks to get an answer. I’m not going to resolve that for you today.

The reason why I’m leaving it in tension is because the point of this text is not the fairness or unfairness of God. The point is found in verses 10-11. These verses serve as a great comfort:

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— Romans 9:10–11 (ESV)

The point of this text is so that three truths can become the ground of comfort and a well-spring of hope for God’s people:

- 1) **God’s sovereign choice is made apart from works, whether good or bad** – *“though they were not yet born and had done nothing good or bad”* (v. 11a).
- 2) **The aim of election is the continuation of God’s purposes** – *“in order that God’s purpose in election might stand”* (11b, NIV).
- 3) **The basis of God’s sovereign choice is God not our works** – *“not because of works but because of him who calls.”* (11c).

Do you see the hope that is offered here when we consider the failure of Israel and, for that matter, the failure of the human race? Surely you know that Israel is not the only story of failure! The hope and comfort here is that the promises of God cannot be thwarted, especially by human beings, because the basis for God’s grace and His mercy is God! What’s more, the guarantee that His promises will come to pass even in failure is the sovereign power of a merciful, grace-giving God. The word of God has not failed because there is something underneath failure: the sovereignty of God.

Oh, I hope you see the beauty of this text! Regardless of the tensions and questions that this truth raises, I want you just to pause here and consider what this means. I know that there are hard implications of this text, but at this point in Romans 9, just bask in the stunning brilliance of what we see here.

First, it means that God is working out a plan for redemption and today is part of that plan. It is not coincidence that you and I are here on this Sunday with this text. And for some of you it may be because God is in the process of pursuing you – even calling you – to put your faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible often talks about God’s calling, and it is the way that He woos people to Himself. So if you see something new, or hear something strangely attractive, or if you sense your heart drawn toward the things of God, it may very well be that God is drawing you to Himself today.

Second, this text shows us in a new way the utter bankruptcy of human works and family lineage. To trust in what you have done or who you are is exposed in this text as spiritual suicide. Everything with the mark of humanity on it cannot stand in God’s presence. Trusting in anything connected to our humanity

be it our works, our family, our church attendance, our morality or even our spirituality is spiritually empty. Our only hope is the grace of God through Christ.

Third, this passage means that God is working out His sovereign plan despite the failure of Israel and despite our failures. This solves the problem of Israel's unbelief by anchoring every ounce of hope in God's sovereignty. It shows us that the sin in the Garden of Eden or the death of Jesus Christ or the failure of Israel is not the final word. God is still working out His plan, and His purposes will stand!

Fourth, this text should leave us in stunned and humbled worship. If you have received Christ as your Savior, you need to know that God chose you. He set His love on you before you ever thought of Him. The family you were born into, the circumstances of your life (even the hard ones), the moment you understood the gospel, and everything about your receiving of Jesus Christ was not because you were smart or spiritual or humble. It was God who conquered your heart. And if you understand what Paul is saying here, you should find yourself saying "Why me?" And that question is only answered with "Because I am who I am." It leads you to worship.

At our Thanksgiving Eve service we sang the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." It is a familiar hymn:

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.*

But there was another one that I had never sung before. The words capture the essence of what this text is all about:

*O that day when freed from sinning,
I shall see thy lovely face;
Clothed then in blood washed linen
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace!*

*Come, my Lord, no longer tarry,
Bring thy promises to pass;
For I know Thy power will keep me
'Til I'm home with Thee at last.*

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