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# The Tragic Unbelief of Israel (Romans 9:1-5)

# 1

**I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (9:1-5)**

Romans 9-11 is one of the most fascinating passages in the New Testament, filled with essential and very practical doctrine and focused on Israel, God's chosen people.

Throughout church history, however, this passage has often been greatly misunderstood. Some commentators and expositors all but ignore it. Others treat it as a parenthesis that has little, if any, connection to the rest of the letter. They take it as an aside in which Paul expresses personal concerns and insights about his fellow Jews. According to those interpreters, the central message of justification by

faith is interrupted at the beginning of chapter 9 and resumes at the beginning of chapter 12. They argue that Paul's beautiful and climactic paean of praise, hope, and assurance in 8:38-39 flows naturally into 12:1.

It is true that if Paul had left out chapters 9-11, the argument and the flow of the letter would still seem unbroken. But, as we will see, it is also true that these three chapters are integrally related to the rest of the letter. Paul did not want to continue his teaching on justification by faith until he clarified some related truths regarding Israel and Israelites. As part of that clarification, the apostle needed to contradict some prevailing falsehoods over which many Christians, especially those who were Jewish, were stumbling.

Paul no doubt had taught the basic truths of Romans 9-11 many times, and, although he had yet to visit Rome in person (1:13), numerous believers there had known Paul personally and had heard those truths spoken from his own lips. It is possible that some of his letters to other churches had been read by Christians in Rome. And because Paul had received previous opposition to these truths, he anticipated the questions and arguments that some of the Roman church members were sure to raise and answers them in the inspired words of these chapters. An initial look at these questions and a brief suggestion of their answers may provide a helpful start to this section.

First, he anticipated the argument that, if the gospel of Jesus Christ offered salvation to all Gentiles, then God must have forsaken His ancient people Israel. Jews who heard the gospel concluded that the doctrine of justification by faith was a new idea that was valid only for Gentiles and that Christians believed the ceremonies and works righteousness of Judaism had no merit before God. They were sure the gospel implied that Jews no longer had a unique place or purpose in God's plan of redemption.

These Jews were quite right, of course, that the gospel discounts Jewish ritual and works righteousness as a means of salvation. But ritualism and legalism, even the keeping of God's divinely-revealed law, had *never* been a means of salvation, only a means of expressing or symbolizing obedience to God. As Paul makes clear earlier in this letter (see especially chaps. 3-5), God has never justified any person, Jew or Gentile—not even Abraham—on any other basis than His grace made effective by personal faith. It was also true that the New Covenant in the blood of Christ had replaced the Old Covenant and that God was calling out a new people for His name from among all nations and peoples.

In his introduction to this letter, Paul states unambiguously that Christ had given him a unique apostleship to the Gentiles (1:1-5; cf. Gal. 1:16). But the book of Acts clearly indicates that he also was called to bring the gospel to "the sons of Israel" (9:15). It is therefore not

strange that, whenever possible, this apostle to the Gentiles began a new ministry by first preaching the gospel to Jews, in a synagogue or other meeting place (see, e.g., Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2; 19:8). He was genuinely, passionately concerned for Israel's spiritual condition and so was eager to answer the questions he knew they were asking.

Near the end of Romans 11 Paul asserts with divine authority that the Savior of the world came from Zion (that is, was a Jew) and that ultimately "all Israel will be saved," just as the prophet Isaiah had declared (Rom. 11:26; cf. Isa. 59:20-21; 27:9). Early in His earthly ministry, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "salvation is from the Jews" and that He was the promised Jewish Messiah who would offer salvation not only to Jews but to all mankind (John 4:22-26). Paul was doubtless familiar with that declaration by his Lord, and he assures the Romans that it is inconceivable that God could reject and forget His people Israel. True Christianity and anti-Semitism are therefore contradictory terms in the most absolute sense.

Paul anticipated and answered a second question he knew would arise in the minds of many of his readers, namely, "If salvation is *from* the Jews and is first of all *to* the Jews, why did Israel, including her highest religious leaders, reject Jesus as their Messiah, Savior, and King?" If, as Paul said, "the gospel... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), and if God grants "glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (2:10), why are most Jews still in unbelief? Why is the uniquely chosen and blessed nation of Israel, who knows the law and the prophets so well, not only rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ but zealously persecuting fellow Jews who believe it?

As we will study in detail in a later chapter, Paul's response to such thinking was: "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone" of salvation by faith (9:30-32). Continuing his explanation, the apostle says, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [fellow Jews] is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:1-4).

Because Paul well understood that most of his fellow Jews trusted in their descent from Abraham and in their good works, he asserts in

unmistakable terms that “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Rom. 2:28-29). In other words, the true Jew is a spiritual Jew, a Jew whose heart and mind have been cleansed and purified (“circumcised”) by the Spirit and who therefore belongs to God by faith. Neither physical circumcision nor physical lineage from Abraham can save a person. They can, in fact, easily become barriers to salvation by giving a false sense of spiritual security. Trusting in such human things kept Jews from receiving Jesus Christ.

Because the gospel is clear that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith, the Jews must turn from their trust in their own religious achievement, humbling themselves, rejecting the intimidating pressure of the tradition they lived by. They rejected that gospel and thus rejected their Messiah.

This salvation was not new. “Apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested,” Paul says, “being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction” (Rom. 3:21-22). The individual Jew has never been saved on any other basis than personal faith in God, no matter how pure and well documented his physical descent from Abraham. “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one” (3:28-30). God creates Jews and Gentiles alike, and He saves them alike, in faith, apart from works and rituals. The Jews were not saved because the barriers of ceremonies, traditions, and legalism in general blocked their way.

The apostle later asks rhetorically, “I say then, they [Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous” (11:11). In other words, Israel’s failure to come to Jesus Christ in faith, tragic as it has been, is not permanent or irreversible. In fact, because Israel’s failure opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, jealousy of the Gentiles eventually will have a part in leading Israel to turn to the Savior God through faith in Christ, to receive at last the Messiah they rejected at His first coming.

Not only that, the apostle says, but, “if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” (v. 12). If Israel’s unbelief brought so many Gentiles to the Lord, how many more will be brought to Him when Israel finally believes. John reveals that the number will be incal-

culable. "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands" (Rev. 7:9).

This question could be stated another way: "If Abraham is the father of those who are truly saved by faith, how can his descendants largely reject God's way of salvation as set forth in the gospel of Jesus Christ?" The apostle had answered that question in chapter 4, saying,

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. . . . And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them. (Rom. 4:1-5, 11)

In other words, large numbers of Jews reject the gospel of Christ because they trust in the outward rite of circumcision and, as already mentioned, in their physical descent from Abraham, rather than in the unqualified faith in God that brought salvation to Abraham and made him "the father of *all* who believe without being circumcised," Gentile as well as Jew (v. 11, emphasis added).

Paul knew that a third and closely related question would also arise in the minds of Jews: "Granted that individual Jews must be saved by personal faith, what about the *nation* of Israel? Has God discarded His ancient chosen nation?" Paul's response to that question is given in chapter 9. It is the "Israelites," he explains, "to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen" (9:4-5). It has always been a unique blessing and privilege to be a Jew, and the nation of Israel has always held "favored status" before God among the nations of the world.

But that favored position has not prevented God from disciplining that nation or from temporarily putting it aside "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). Once that has occurred, the Lord "will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on

Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born” (Zech. 12:10). Then “the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him” (Dan. 7:27).

In this section Paul shows that the nation of Israel was temporarily set aside by God because of her continued impenitence and unbelief, most especially for her rejection of the Messiah. In His gracious sovereignty, however, and with divine certainty, God will preserve for Himself a remnant of Israel. That nation, in the form of an ordained remnant of its people, will be brought by faith not only into the purified and restored kingdom of “David’s greater Son” but into the eternal kingdom of God.

Paul also reminds his readers that, just as Isaiah prophesied, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved” (Rom. 9:27; Isa. 10:22). Through His prophets God had made clear that only a remnant of the nation would ultimately come to Him in genuine faith. Through Isaiah He had promised that “in the last days, then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (Isa. 11:11-12; cf. v. 16). Through Jeremiah He promised: “Then I Myself shall gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and shall bring them back to their pasture; and they will be fruitful and multiply” (Jer. 23:3; cf. Mic. 2:12; Zech. 8:11-12). And because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29), Israel has the divine guarantee that this remnant, representing the nation, *will* be saved. God’s plan from eternity past has always been that Israel’s rejection of Him would be both partial and temporary.

In those answers to fellow Jews, Paul also answered a question he knew would arise in the minds of many Gentile believers. “If God did not keep His promises to His chosen people Israel,” they would wonder, “how can we expect Him to keep His promises to us as Gentile believers?” The problem, of course, is in the question. God *did not fail* in His promises to Israel or to individual Jews. His promises were given to *faithful* Israel and to *faithful*, believing Jews, to those who were spiritual, not simply physical, descendants of Abraham. Because he was such a model of faithfulness, Abraham not only was the father of the faithful who lived after him but, in a prevenient sense, the father even of the



faithful who lived before him. Abraham's faith reached forward, as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself tells us that, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

As we shall learn, these questions and many more are answered with profound wisdom and holy reason.

So overwhelmed is he with what the Lord has given him to write, Paul ends this three-chapter section on Israel (Rom. 9-11) with a majestic, triumphant doxology of praise and thanksgiving to God: "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" (Rom. 11:33-36).

In the first of these three chapters, Paul focuses first on the tragedy of Israel's unbelief (Rom. 9:1-5). He then declares that this unbelief is part of God's eternal plan of redemption (vv. 6-13) and demonstrates that this divine plan for Israel's unbelief is not capricious or unfair but is perfectly just (vv. 14-29).

In expressing his deep sorrow over Israel's spiritual condition, the apostle first declares his love for her people as fellow Jews.

### PAUL'S PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH UNBELIEVING ISRAEL

**I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (9:1-3)**

As just noted, Paul begins this section on Israel by declaring his personal grief over the unbelief of his beloved kinsmen. He has just presented eight chapters of divine truths that are thrilling to those who believe but devastating to all unbelievers, particularly so to unbelieving Jews, who felt totally secure in their racial heritage from Abraham, in their legalistic performance of ceremony, and in their adherence to rabbinical traditions. An unbelieving Jew who took seriously Paul's words in chapters 1-8 would likely feel that the gospel rendered him an utter outcast, written off by God.

Paul had once been the most zealous persecutor of Jews who named the name of Christ, relentlessly "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Now he had been completely transformed, gladly counting himself among the disciples of Christ

and strongly condemning the legalism and false security of traditional Judaism. To unbelieving religious Jews, Christianity would be viewed as an anti-Jewish conspiracy. In their eyes, Paul utterly contradicted the teaching of Moses, preaching such things as, "Let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him [Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). Paul, a former Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5) and zealous defender of traditional Judaism (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1-2), was now considered the traitor of traitors to his people, more despised than a pagan Gentile. He was the great betrayer, the Judas of Judaism and the archenemy of Israel (see, e.g., Acts 9:23; 13:50; 20:3; 2 Cor. 11:24).

Still today, Jews look upon Christianity as inherently anti-Semitic. When they hear Jesus proclaimed as their long-awaited Messiah, the great Savior and Deliverer of Israel, they become highly incensed. Instead of seeing the gospel as the perfect fulfillment and completion of Judaism, they see it as a destructive threat. Unfortunately, their many persecutions throughout history at the hands of professed Christians exacerbates that resentment.

Paul had great concern not just for Israel as a nation but an incredibly profound love for Israelites as individuals. And he knew that before unbelieving Jews would listen to anything else he had to say, they first would have to be convinced that he truly cared for them and was far from leading an anti-Jewish conspiracy. In his preaching and writing the apostle irrefutably undermined the two basic pillars of popular Judaism, physical descent from Abraham and works righteousness under the law. Like Jesus during His earthly ministry, Paul stripped bare the hypocritical and legalistic sham of rabbinical Judaism. Also like Jesus, he knew he had to assure unbelieving Jews of his genuine love for them. He had to convince them that he proclaimed the gospel as a friend who wanted to protect and rescue them, not as an enemy who sought to condemn and destroy them. He had to show them his heart before he could give them his theology.

He begins by assuring them of his personal honesty and integrity, saying, **I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying**. Paul certified his genuineness by declaring that this **truth** was told **in Christ**. He called his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as an indisputable witness. He was saying that everything he thought or did or felt was done for and through his Lord. Paul's union with Christ was the orbit within which his emotions moved and the fountain from which they flowed. In other words, Christ, who was the apostle's very life and breath, would attest to the truth of what he was about to teach. His omniscient, righteous, sovereign, and gracious Lord, who perfectly knew Paul's heart and motives, would affirm the truthfulness of the apostle's limitless love for his fellow

Jews. In the words of the nineteenth-century Swiss commentator and theologian Frederic Godet, "In the eyes of Paul there is something so holy in Christ, that in the pure and luminous atmosphere of His felt presence no lie, and not even any exaggeration, is possible" (*Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883], 338).

Paul frequently called God as his witness. In the opening of this letter he assured the Roman church that "God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers" (1:9-10). For Paul, a promise made was a promise kept. In his second letter to Corinth, he wrote, "I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth" (2 Cor. 1:23). Later in that same letter he again assured his readers of his truthfulness by declaring, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying" (11:31).

Giving the same assurance in 9:1, Paul insisted **I am not lying**. The apostle would not say or do anything simply for the sake of expediency or to make a favorable impression. He was not trying to entice his Jewish readers to accept what he said by flattering them or by making insincere and exaggerated claims for himself. He would not say anything that was untruthful or hypocritical in order to gain their attention or their agreement. His words exactly expressed his mind and heart.

Next he calls his own **conscience** as a **witness**. While defending himself before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, "Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day'" (Acts 23:1). It was not Paul's conscience in itself that was reliable. His conscience was consistently clear and uncondemning because he lived in consistent obedience to the Lord. "For our proud confidence is this," he said, "the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you" (2 Cor. 1:12).

Contrary to the common advice, "Let your conscience be your guide," the natural human conscience is far from being a reliable guide. It can be "seared" (1 Tim. 4:2), covered with insensitive scar tissue. Like every other aspect of man's fallen nature, it is tainted and corrupted by sin. "To the pure, all things are pure," Paul explained to Titus, "but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:15). Through neglect of fellowship with God and disobedience to His Word, even a believer's conscience can become insensitive and unreliable. That is why Paul does not allow for believers to violate conscience, even in regard to nonmoral things. To do so is to train yourself to reject conscience (cf.

Rom. 14:20-23). All believers should be able to say with Martin Luther, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

A conscience surrendered to God’s Word is a conscience that is subject to **the Holy Spirit**, whom Paul next invokes as a witness to his truthfulness and to the reliability of his conscience.

The human conscience by itself is neutral. It is activated by and according to the nature of the person to whom it belongs. The conscience of an evil, unregenerate man is no guard against sinful thoughts and actions. The conscience of a faithful believer, on the other hand, is reliable, because it is activated by the truths and standards of God’s Word and is energized by the power of God’s indwelling **Holy Spirit**. When we live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and obey the Spirit, we can trust our conscience because it is under divine control. The Spirit’s perfect prompting will either commend or condemn what we are doing or are planning to do.

Because what he is about to say seems so unbelievable—at best, highly exaggerated—Paul has an important reason for summoning such an array of witnesses.

His introductory statement is believable enough. Few Christians who knew Paul would doubt that he had **great sorrow and unceasing grief** in his **heart** for his unbelieving fellow Jews. As noted above, although he was a specially appointed apostle to the Gentiles, he also was commissioned to proclaim the gospel to “the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). As he makes clear in this present passage, it would have torn his heart out were he not to have opportunity to proclaim the way of salvation to his fellow sons and daughters of Israel. Even *with* the opportunity for witness, he could not assuage the **great sorrow and unceasing grief** he felt for those Jews who refused to believe.

It was that same kind of grief that the prophet Samuel had for Saul. We read that “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35). By his own arrogance and disobedience, Saul had made himself an outcast before God and his people. But out of deep love for the Lord’s anointed, Samuel never stopped grieving on the king’s behalf. In the massive psalm that so highly exalts God’s Word, the writer confesses: “My eyes shed streams of water, because they [Israel] do not keep Thy law” (Ps. 119:136).

Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because of his deep grief over the unbelief and wickedness of his people. “Oh, that my head were waters,” he mourned, “and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (Jer. 9:1). Later he implores: “Listen and give heed, do not be haughty, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God, before He brings darkness and before your feet stumble on the dusky mountains, and

while you are hoping for light He makes it into deep darkness, and turns it into gloom. But if you will not listen to it, my soul will sob in secret for such pride; and my eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears, because the flock of the Lord has been taken captive” (Jer. 13:15-17).

Israel’s rejection of her Messiah weighed so heavily on Paul’s heart that he called on two members of the Trinity to attest to his unrelenting anguish. And he knew that, but for God’s gracious intervention on the Damascus road, he not only would still be among those unbelieving Jews but would still be leading them in persecuting those who had acknowledged their Messiah.

The full depth and genuineness of Paul’s grief is expressed in his almost unbelievable declaration that **I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.** As indicated by his opening qualifier, **I could wish,** Paul knew he could not reject his salvation and again become **accursed** (devoted to destruction in eternal hell) and thus forever **separated from Christ.**

It was for the salvation of his fellow Jews that Paul expresses himself in hyperbole, saying he was willing even to forfeit his salvation, if, somehow, that could save them from God’s condemnation. No one, of course, knew better than Paul that salvation is a believer’s most precious treasure and that only Christ’s sacrificial death has the power to save. But here he was speaking emotionally, not theologically, and there is no reason to doubt that his awesome statement of self-sacrifice was the expression of a completely honest heart. Paul felt such love that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation and spend eternity in hell if somehow that could bring his fellow Jews to faith in Christ! He knew, of course, that, even if such a thing were possible, his being separated from Christ would have no power in itself to bring a single person to Christ. The apostle also knew that the obvious impossibility and worthlessness of such a sacrifice would cause some of his critics to accuse him of safely offering to sacrifice that which he knew was impossible to lose. It was doubtless to counter such accusations that he had called Christ and the Holy Spirit to witness his sincerity.

Paul’s passion to offer such an ultimate sacrifice reflected the gracious heart of God, who so loved the unloving and evil world that He sent His only begotten Son to provide for its redemption (John 3:16). It also reflected the equally gracious heart of the Son, who, in obedience to the Father, gave His life that others might live. Paul had just finished rejoicing in the believer’s absolute security in Christ, from which “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing” can “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Yet his love for the lost in Israel gave

him the willingness to surrender those intimate, inestimable, and eternal blessings, if doing so would bring his Jewish brethren to Christ.

It was exactly Paul's great love for the lost that made him such a powerful instrument in the hands of God. Evangelism has little effect if the evangelist has little love for the lost. John Knox reflected Paul's great love when he prayed, "Give me Scotland or I die," Henry Martyn when he said, "O that I were a flame of fire in the hand of God," and David Brainerd, who prayed that he might burn out for God, which he did before he was thirty years old.

Moses loved the fickle, ungrateful, and disobedient Israelites in much the same way that Paul loved them centuries later. Interceding for them after they built and worshiped the golden calf during the very time he was on Mount Sinai receiving the tablets of the law from God, Moses pleaded with the Lord on their behalf, "Now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!" (Ex. 32:32).

Some years ago, a young woman in our area was stabbed and killed while jogging near her apartment. Both the woman and her husband were Christians, but the woman's parents were not, and she had a great burden for their salvation. Shortly before she was killed she had confided to her husband that she would be willing to die if her death could be used by God to win her parents to Himself. After the memorial service, in which the gospel was proclaimed, her mother did indeed receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Only Christ's own gracious love in the hearts of those who belong to Him can produce such self-sacrificing devotion. The more we obey His Word and surrender to His will, the more we will love as He loves.

### GOD'S PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH UNBELIEVING ISRAEL

**who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (9:4-5)**

Paul next expresses his deep sorrow over Israel's unbelief because of their personal connection with God. He not only loved Jews because they were his physical kinsmen but even more because they are God's chosen people. He loved whomever God loves, and because God loves Israel uniquely, Paul loved Israel uniquely.

In these two verses the apostle sets forth nine marvelous privileges that belong to Israel, graciously bestowed on them by a loving God.

First, they are privileged simply to be **Israelites**, descendants of Abraham through Isaac and then through Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen. 32:28).

Throughout history, Israelites (or Jews, as they came to be called after the Exile in Babylon) have distinguished themselves in virtually every field of human endeavor—in science, the arts, music, business, education, political leadership, and countless other areas. They have always been a noble people and have produced a disproportionate share of the world's geniuses. When God prepared His special earthly vineyard, "He planted it with the choicest vine," namely, Israel (Isa. 5:2).

Second, it is Israelites **to whom belongs the adoption as sons**. Beyond their patriarchal ancestry, Jews are privileged to have **adoption as God's sons**. God commanded Moses to "say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My first-born'''" (Ex. 4:22). Through Hosea, the Lord declared that "when Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). At the covenant at Sinai, when the law was given through Moses, God declared to Israel, "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Israel was separated out to be His unique and righteous witness to the rest of the world.

It is clear from the context of those verses, as well as from countless other parts of Scripture, that the *nation* of Israel was, in some respect, God's child. Salvation has always been on an individual basis. One person cannot be saved by another's faith. As Paul makes clear a few verses later, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom. 9:6). Yet, while not in the sense of salvation, it was as a nation that God sovereignly bestowed on Israel His special calling, covenant, blessing, and protection.

The Old Testament does not refer to God as the Father of individual Jews—in the way the New Testament does of God as Father of individual Christians—but as the Father of Israel. It was for that reason, among others, that the Jewish leaders were so incensed when Jesus referred to God in a personal relationship as His Father.

But Israel poorly fulfilled that calling, wasting its privilege. Through Isaiah the Lord lamented, "Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, you who have been borne by Me from birth, and have been carried from the womb; even to your old age, I shall be the same, and even to your graying years I shall bear you! I have done it, and I shall carry you; and I shall bear you, and I shall deliver you" (Isa. 46:3-4).

Third, God blessed Israel by revealing to her His own presence in the Shekinah glory. In that unique and inexplicable way, God dwelt in the midst of His people. In the wilderness, "the glory of the Lord ap-

peared [to Israel] in the cloud” (Ex. 16:10). It was in His glory that He appeared to Israel at Sinai (Ex. 24:16-17), and His glory was present in the tent of meeting, where He spoke “with the sons of Israel” (Ex. 29:42-43; Lev. 9:23). His glory was supremely present in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and then the Temple, manifested in light between the wings of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant (see Ex. 25:22; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11).

Fourth, Israel was privileged to have been given **the covenants**. The first covenant was with Abraham, the physical father of all Jews (Gen. 12:15-17) and the spiritual father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11). Through Moses, Israel was given the covenant of law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-31; cf. Deut. 29-30). Through David Israel was given the covenant of an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:8-16). It would even be through Israel that God’s supreme covenant of redemption through His Son would come (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 37:26). No other nation has or ever will be blessed with such covenants. As one commentator has observed, no aspect of Israel’s history pointed out their uniqueness as the recipients of redemptive revelation more than these covenants.

Fifth, Israel was privileged by **the giving of the Law** of God to them through Moses. In that **Law** Israel not only was taught the Ten Commandments but countless other principles and standards, the obeying of which would honor God and bring blessing on the people. They were shown the way of blessing and prosperity, not only morally and spiritually but also materially. To disobey was to be cursed (cf. Deut. 27-28).

As Israel was encamped on the plains of Moab, shortly before entering the Promised Land, Moses reminded the people:

See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:5-8)

As Paul had already told his readers, Israel had the incomparable privilege of being custodian of the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2), which not only included the books of Moses but all of what we now call the Old Testament.

Sixth, Israel was uniquely blessed by being entrusted with **the temple service**, through which she worshiped and dealt with sin be-



fore the Lord. **The temple service** refers to the entire ceremonial system that God revealed through Moses—the sacrifices, offerings, cleansings, and other means of worship and repentance administered by the priests and Levites. When Israel obediently and sincerely worshiped the Lord, He promised: “I will meet there [at the tent of meeting] with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. And I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God” (Ex. 29:43-46).

Seventh, Israel was given **the promises** of God in a distinct and unique way. Although Paul does not explain the nature of **the promises**, it seems likely that he was referring to the promised Messiah, who would come out of Israel, and to His promised kingdom, as well as to eternal life. That is the promise of which Peter reminded his audience in Jerusalem at Pentecost, saying, “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). Later in the book of Acts, Luke reports Paul’s message to Jews in Galatia: “We preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.’ And as for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David’” (Acts 13:32-34; cf. 2 Sam. 7:8-17).

Eighth, Paul reminds his readers that it was from Israel that God raised up **the fathers**, beginning with the first great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. It was through those men that the foundations of all the blessings were laid.

Ninth, and finally, Israel was privileged to provide the lineage of **Christ according to the flesh**. Christ was not incidentally born a Jew but was preordained to be a human descendant of Abraham and of David. It is for that reason that Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph (1:1-17) and that Luke gives the genealogy of His natural mother, Mary (Luke 3:23-38). As noted above, Jesus Himself told the Samaritan woman that “salvation is from the Jews” and that He was the promised Jewish Messiah who would offer salvation to all mankind (John 4:22-26).

In closing this abbreviated but comprehensive account of Israel’s special blessings, Paul declares that Jesus Christ—by far their greatest blessing, the blessing in whom all the others find their full meaning—**is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.**

Those words are not so much a benediction as an affirmation of Christ's divine majesty and lordship. Without exception in Scripture, both in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, a doxology always places the word "blessed" *before* the name of God. Here, Paul uses the reverse form, **God blessed**, indicating beyond doubt that the apostle intentionally equates **Christ** with **God**. The antecedent of **God** is **who**, and the antecedent of **who** is **Christ**.

He was the supreme blessing, yet they rejected Him! Tragic unbelief that grieved the heart of Paul and grieves the heart of God Himself.