

Dispensations Romans 9 : Israel's Past

[The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

Today we start a series of three talks on chapters nine to eleven of the book of Romans. These three chapters sit between the setting out of the gospel - what it is, who needs it and its results – which are the subject of the first eight chapters, and the practical effects of the gospel in a Christian's life, which are the subject of chapters twelve to sixteen.

The subject of Israel

Chapter's nine to eleven are self-evidently about Israel, but the exact nature of their content and meaning are heavily disputed amongst Christians. The contributors to the Truth for Today programmes maintain what is known as Dispensationalism. That's a big word, I make it seven syllables (!), but its meaning isn't too complicated. Put simply, it means that God has dealt with people in different ways during the various stages of human history. How He dealt with Abraham differed from how He dealt with the nation of Israel from the time of Moses onward. He now deals differently again with the Church today. Crucially in the context of these chapters, we believe that God has not finished with the nation of Israel and that, at some time in the future, He will start dealing with them as a nation once again, distinct from, and after, the current Church age. This differs from the teaching, often called, Covenant Theology, that maintains that God has now finished His work with Israel as a nation, and that most Old Testament promises to Israel should now be read as applying to the Church.

I hope I'm not misrepresenting anybody by generalising in this way, and please don't tune out if you come from a different church background! I trust I will say many things that any believer in Christ can say, "Amen" to, and I'm certainly not looking to criticise other people's sincerely held views, or make converts to my theological position. I shall simply try and explain and expound the chapter as I understand it. One more word of warning though! Paul defends his teaching in this chapter by appealing very strongly to the sovereignty of God, and he makes some striking statements about it. So, settle in for a chapter that will make you ask some hard questions and grasp some tough concepts!

The first eight chapters summarised

First though, let me attempt an extremely brief summary of the book of Romans so far! In the first eight chapters Paul has established:

- The power of the gospel (1:16a).
- That the gospel is for, "The Jew first" (1:16b).

- The primary principle of faith (1:17).
- That the gospel is founded on, “The righteousness of God” (1:17).
- The universality of sin, guilt and lostness (up to 3:23), including:
 - Total pagans (chapter 1).
 - Pagan moralists (2:1-16).
 - Jews (2:17 to 3:23).
- That justification is by faith alone (Chapter 4).
- God’s glorious **gift** of righteousness (Chapter 5).
- Our death to sin, resulting in the liberty of union with Christ (Chapter 6).
- The gospel brings freedom from the law and bondage (Chapter 7).
- The wonders of walking in the Spirit and how this makes us, “More than conquerors” (Chapter 8).

Back to Israel

Phew! That brings us back to chapter nine. In this chapter, and the two that follow it, he returns to a topic he first picked up in chapter three, namely the advantages of the Jewish nation and how they have not grasped them.

If you read through the whole book of Romans, which is something I would strongly recommend, you can’t help noticing how often Paul anticipates questions and challenges to what he is saying, and then takes time to answer them. In chapters nine to eleven Paul anticipates the question, “What about the Jews then? Has God abandoned His chosen people and have you Paul, once a notable Jewish leader, renounced your own nation?”

But before we go any further, we had better read the first section of our chapter. This is verses one to five.

“I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.”

Great sadness

That’s quite a sentence! Let’s try and step our way through it. Paul commences the chapter by stating very clearly that he has a large and continual sadness in his life. There is a constantly nagging heartache for him, and the reason for this sorrow is that the majority of his fellow Jews are living in darkness, still estranged from the God they claim to worship. In fact, his anguish for them is so strong that he expresses the same willingness that Moses voices in Exodus 32:32, that is, he would be prepared to be lost himself if that could in some way mean that the Jews would be saved. Let nobody claim then that Paul is callously unconcerned about his countrymen. He refers to them as “countrymen according to the flesh” to distinguish them from his new fellow citizens of the country called heaven.

Great blessing

He then lists eight fantastic blessings that God had given to His nation that we can only really glance at:

Adoption

That is the placing of Israel as God's son. See passages such as Exodus 4:22 where God instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Israel is My son, My firstborn."

The glory

Evidently a reference to what is sometimes called the Shekinah glory; the glory of God's own presence dwelling amongst His people.

The covenants

The solemn, binding agreements between God and His people, founded on the commitments of both parties.

The giving of the law

I.e. the law of Moses.

The service of God

Which refers to the whole offerings system by which God was worshipped in the tabernacle and temple.

The promises

Unconditional promises of blessing that God has made, not dependent on the faithfulness of His people.

The fathers

Meaning, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: the initial recipients of God's promises. Being the ancestors, humanly speaking, of Christ. The high point of all their blessings, but the very point at which they failed most completely.

But that is racing ahead to the end of the chapter! In case anybody was misled by the human ancestry of Christ, Paul carefully states the full deity of Christ Jesus as, "The eternally blessed God."

What went wrong?

So, what went wrong? How can the recipients of such blessings, all carefully detailed in the Old Testament, fail to be all saved? Has the word of God failed and not been effective? We need to read the next section of our chapter. This is verses six to twenty-four.

"But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor all they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived

by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

An extended piece of reasoning

So, Paul maintains that the word of God has functioned just as it should. The fact that not all Israel has been saved is because not all of Israel are truly Israel! What Paul means by this rather unusual piece of logic, is that God has always made sovereign choices throughout Biblical history, and the current situation is just another example. He is going to give us four separate instances of God exercising His divine will and making stark, choices with very significant consequences.

Example 1: Isaac and Ishmael

The Jews prided themselves on being the children of Abraham, as noted by Jesus in Matthew 3:9. But Abraham’s descendants were not **all** Jews, only those descended from Isaac. Ishmael was born before Isaac and many nations descended from him, but they were not the children of the promise, or the children of God.

Paul calls them here, “Children of the flesh.” Some might argue that this is a special case because Ishmael was born to Hagar, who was an Egyptian slave; so of course her descendants were not children of the promise. But Paul has another case study to hand!

Example 2: Jacob and Esau

Jacob and Esau were both the sons of Isaac and Rebecca, in fact they were twins. There is no arguing about maternal distinctions in this case! Not only so, but Esau is first out of the womb, and so should have had all the blessings of the firstborn. But, before they have even been born, God instructs Rebecca that, “The older shall serve the younger.” Many years later, via Malachi, God declares, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” However you understand the exact meaning of that phrase, it is clearly intended to show a very stark distinction in God’s attitude to the two men and the nations descended from them. These two examples are very distinct ‘forks’ or

'branches' in the history of Abraham's descendants. The blessing all goes down one branch and the choice is made by God before the individuals involved are born.

Example 3: the entire nation of Israel

This example involves God deciding to have mercy on the people of Israel after their outrageous disobedience, led by Aaron, in the matter of the golden calf. Without the deliberate, sovereign action of God everybody in Israel, with the possible exception of Moses and Joshua, should have died! Their sin was truly shocking. The only reason they survived, as individuals and as a nation, is because God chose to have mercy. It really is that simple. The nation failed abjectly, but the word of God didn't fail and God Himself didn't fail. No Jew would ever complain about this sovereign choice of God to pardon and bless them.

But they ought to have learned the very important lesson, that blessing comes not from human will ("Him who wills") or human achievements ("Him who runs"), but from God showing mercy. This is a really important point for believers in every age and dispensation to grasp. None of us have any reasonable, or unreasonable, expectation of receiving blessing from God based on our own ancestry, desires, or performance. When God saves us and blesses us it is because that's the kind of merciful and compassionate God He is!

Can the same God make choices to **not** bless, or even worse, to judge and condemn? If the previous examples of Ishmael and Esau were not enough, Paul has one final case study for us.

Example 4: Pharaoh

This is the Pharaoh who refused to let Israel go from Egypt, and the point is God's sovereign decision to confirm Pharaoh in his stubborn disobedience, and bring judgement on him. Pharaoh exalted himself and opposed God and God's people. God chose to use that very stubbornness to demonstrate His own power and might. God takes this even further and declares that He deliberately raised up Pharaoh for this very purpose. Paul's conclusion in verse 18 is crystal clear, "[God] has mercy on whom He will, and whom He wills He hardens."

God is sovereign

So, Paul has set out his case that God is always free to make sovereign choices and the Old Testament is littered with examples of Him doing so. The objection that now arises is that, if this is the case, God has no right to condemn people like Pharaoh because God made them like that, and He can hardly complain when they do what He has foreordained! This is a very modern sounding objection!

How dare God challenge the sovereign will of human beings to do as they choose? And, if He does, then it is all His fault anyway! It's strange how we are adamant that the one Being who has limitless knowledge, wisdom and holiness is not allowed to exercise freedom of choice; whereas we short-sighted, ignorant sinners must have our freedom of will and expression preserved at all costs! We want to be the judge and seek to place God in the dock as the accused. Paul, along with the rest of the Bible, is clear that this is totally back to front. Do we assert the rights and liberties of the insects in our gardens, or the mosquitoes in the world's jungles, when their existence and activities interfere with our health or our enjoyment? Closer to Paul's argument; do we avow the priority of the choices of a jar or a bowl, over those of the craftsman who made it? Paul, for one, has no doubt about the answers to these questions. God has an absolute right to do

as He chooses, both in mercy and in judgement. But he doesn't describe this as a crude overriding of all human freedoms. Paul's argument is that Pharaoh, and many others like him, made his own choices to rebel against God and oppose His plans. Far from squashing him like an insect, God demonstrated considerable long-suffering. When Pharaoh's heart was hardened, God was in fact choosing to reinforce Pharaoh's own choices and actions, not steamrolling them. The result was glory to God, even from human rebellion.

Blessing brings God more glory than judgement!

If human rebellion can demonstrate God's glory, then God's mercy and grace to the utterly undeserving can do so much more abundantly! And since God's sovereign will is the source of this mercy, He can direct it towards whomever He chooses. According to verse 24, God is currently choosing to demonstrate it towards both Jews and Gentiles.

God has sovereignly set aside Israel for the moment

We need to read the final section of our chapter to see how Paul works through this. Here are verses 25 to 33.

“As He says also in Hosea: “I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved. For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the LORD will make a short work upon the earth.” And as Isaiah said before: “Unless the LORD of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah.” What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.””

The argument summarised

Summarising the argument so far: the Jews have been the beneficiaries of God's sovereign goodness in the choice of Isaac over Ishmael, the choice of Jacob over Esau and the exercise of God's grace after the golden calf. To deny God's right to act in this sovereign manner would be to argue that the Ishmaelites and Edomites should be included in the people of God – something that no Jew would ever countenance! It would also be to argue that the nation of Israel should have been exterminated after their sin with the golden calf.

This is not likely to be a line of reasoning that any Jew would wish to follow! Paul now goes to the next step and argues that God is equally as entitled to exercise His sovereign grace towards Gentiles as He is towards Jews. After all, God is either sovereign or He isn't: He can't be constrained to only act in grace towards one group of people.

The prophets agree

Paul quotes from two Old Testament prophets, Hosea and Isaiah, to establish his argument. Hosea is the prophet who most vividly, and poignantly, shows us the anguish of God at the unfaithfulness of His people, but still insists on God's determination to ultimately turn them back to Himself. Here Paul uses the words of Hosea to establish that God is not only going to turn the Israelites back to Himself, He is also going to make the Gentiles, who were never His nation, or any one nation at all, into, "Sons of the living God."

Isaiah was one of the last prophets speaking before Israel and Judah went into captivity and, while calling the nation to repentance, he spells out clearly that they will not obey, and details the judgements that will follow. Paul quotes Isaiah here as saying that even though Israel had become a great and numerous nation; only God's mercy would prevent them from being as totally obliterated, as Sodom and Gomorrah had once been.

In verse 30 Paul summarises the position as it stood then, and as it still stands today. The Gentiles, who had historically never pursued God and His righteousness, are now attaining righteousness on the basis of faith. That has been the topic of chapters one to eight. The Jews, who had sought God, but based on their own righteousness, founded on law-keeping, have not, in fact, attained righteousness at all.

The last verse of our chapter explains that the Jews have stumbled over the very Christ who came from their nation. The problem then is not God's word but their unbelief.

The following two chapters will take the story further on, but for now we have seen again that the great dividing point is Christ. We have also seen firmly established the right of God to bless whomever He chooses – including us! The chapter ends on a beautifully positive note, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." Whatever our ancestry, history, and current state; if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we will not be put to shame. That's a wonderful promise to all believers of every age!

Heavenly Father, thank you that Your mercy and compassion have been extended as far as us. We never could, and never will deserve forgiveness or blessing, but You make them freely available through Your Son, Jesus Christ and we do thank You!

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on Romans 9 Israel's Past, Dispensations, talk number T1157.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.