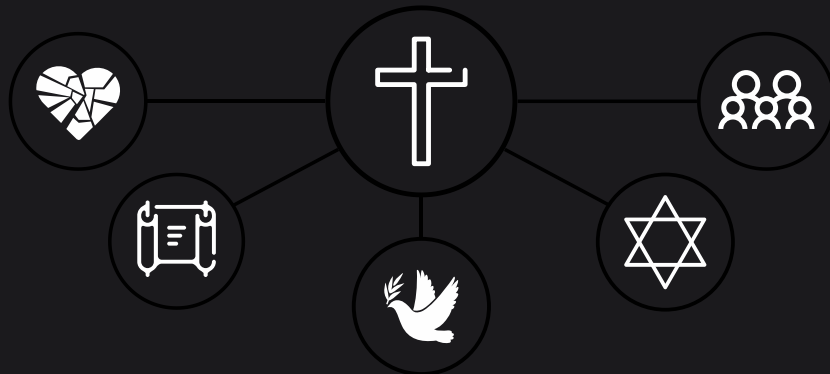




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Romans and the Future Gospel

Text: Romans 9:14-33

Date: April 23, 2023

Main Idea: God is a merciful and gracious God to sinners throughout the scriptures, from the beginning of time until now.

Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will

need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

Discussion-Based Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching. The answers are provided below.

There is also additional space after each section if you print the lessons and take notes.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question: People often say they want God to be fair. Based on all we know from Romans, what would happen if God were fair?

READ ROMANS 9:14-33

The next three chapter (9-11) are all about Israel. Remember, this is written to Jews and Gentiles. It's written to the church in Rome, that is filled with both Jews and Gentiles, so the question of Israel is an important and big one. In these next 3 chapters, Paul is answering the question "so what about the Jews?"

Highlight – What stands out?

If you're a discussion-based class, just choose 1-2 of these to answer.

1. **Large Group:** What theological ideas do you notice in this passage? What theological words or phrases do you notice? (These can be popcorn answers where people just say what they notice.)

Mercy, election, justice, God hardens people's hearts, God is creator, vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy, by faith.

2. **Large Group:** What rhetorical questions does Paul ask? (These can be popcorn answers as well.)

*Is God just? How did righteousness come to the Jews and Gentiles?
Who can resist God's will?*

3. How many Old Testament references do you notice? (If you have a Study Bible or if your Bible has cross references, this will help you.)

Moses, Pharaoh, Hosea 2, multiple passages in Isaiah (1, 10, and others)

4. **Smaller Group:** What does this passage teach you about God?

God is in control of all things. God is just because he is holy. God is good. God saves whomever he wills. God hardens people. God is merciful. God saves. God is the creator.

5. **Smaller Group:** What does this passage teach you about the human condition?

We are sinful, so we harden our hearts. Our natural condition is to be hardened. We are the created, so we cannot answer back to God in defiance and live. We cannot save ourselves.

Explain – What does this mean?

This passage is broken into four sections, with Old Testament references being used to prove his point. So we're going to use those as headings. Paul is trying to explain big truths about God, so he builds his argument over several verses. There are a lot of verses here, so this section is longer than normal.

Tip for Lecture Style: As you write your lesson, you can summarize these details and explain them in your lesson to your class.

Tip for Discussion Based: Read the verses and either explain to move into the discussion of application, or spend some time in discovery as a class.

Romans 9:14-18

1. What big question about God is Paul trying to answer in these verses?

Is God unjust?

2. How does he answer that question?

He goes back to Moses and explains what is happening in his mercy on display in the Exodus. In the Exodus, both Pharaoh and the Israelites didn't seek after God, but God in his mercy saved them, and gave Pharaoh over to his own heart. "He hardens whom he wills and has mercy on whom he wills."

3. Look up Exodus 33:12-34:1. What is the context of this story? What do you know about Israel and Moses from this story? What do you learn about God and his character in this story?

The context of this story is right after the Israelites disobey when Moses is on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments. Moses breaks the tablets, so God is about to give them new ones. The people don't deserve God to dwell among them and show his glory, but he does anyway. Moses asks to see God, so God shows Moses his character—he is gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. In the whole history of Israel's life, they do not deserve God continually going after them, but he does. He does for them what they cannot do for themselves. Some reject him even in that (like those who die in the wilderness and those who rebel in the promised land). But some respond to him in faith.

4. Look up Exodus 9:13-21. What is the context of this story? What do you learn about the human condition in this story? What do you learn about God in this story?

This is when God is showing his power to Israel and Egypt in the plagues. The only thing that keeps Israel from dying and being judged in the plagues is that God preserves them. Pharaoh repeatedly hardens his heart, but the text also says that God hardens his heart. So who is it? God or Pharaoh.

Both.

This is the tension. We harden our hearts because we're born in sin and can do nothing else besides sin. But in order to display his glory and his power, he gives Pharaoh over to what his heart already is—hardened against God. God's purpose in this is to display his power on the earth.

5. How does this help explain why God is just?

God is just because the just condemnation for our sin is death. The fact that anyone is saved is a mercy. His justice is to judge sin. If he didn't judge sin then he wouldn't be just and we couldn't trust him for his goodness and justice. The only way we don't die for our sin is by faith in Christ, who absorbed God's wrath on our behalf. He does all the work for us. And in the case of Israel in Egypt, they trusted in the blood over the doorpost to save them (Exodus 11-12). It was not their ability that saved them. The blood of another saved them.

Romans 9:19-24

1. What big question about God is Paul trying to answer in these verses?

What about free will? How are we at fault if he is the one who hardens? Is there any hope for salvation if he is the one who does it all?

2. How does he answer that question? Who does he say we are and who does he say God is?

Sort of like in Job 33, when God never really gives Job an answer. Paul puts it back on the question asker and gives an image to explain his point. God is the "molder" or some people might say "the potter". We're just clay in his hands. He is the creator, we are the created. So we cannot answer back to him in an accusatory way, we have to trust his character.

3. In verse 22, Paul gives two reasons why God may delay? What two "vessels" are there?

Vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. God delays and works in this way to show his power, his patience, and his wrath against sin.

4. What theological truth mentioned last week is on display in verse 23?

Election and predestination

5. Why is there tension in these verses? (Look at verse 24 to help explain, especially given the tension and conflict all throughout Romans).

The tension is in the fact that the Jews always thought they were the chosen people, and Paul is saying it was never about bloodlines and always about something else. God has a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Romans 9:25-29

1. Who is Paul quoting here in verses 25-26? Look up the context in Hosea 2:21-23. What is the context of Hosea? What is Paul saying about Israel and his work in saving them?

He is quoting Hosea. In this context, Hosea has been asked to marry a woman who is unfaithful. He is calling him to have children by her and name them according to his context. A people who was not God's people will become God's people. A people who did not deserve mercy and could not save themselves, will be given mercy and salvation. And this is not just for Israel, it's for the nations.

2. Look up Isaiah 10:20-23. What is Paul saying about the true Israel and the nature of their salvation?

God's people again have disobeyed him and been brought into exile. But even in their return, he won't bring them all back. Only a people within a people will return—a remnant. And this remnant will lean on him alone and not on what their eyes can see.

3. What do these verses say about God's heart towards his people?

He desires to rescue them. He desires to save them. He works over long processes to bring them back to him.

Romans 9:30-33

1. How does Paul contrast the Jews and Gentiles in these verses? What is the difference between them?

The Gentiles pursue righteousness by faith and find life. The Jews pursued it by the law and stumble.

2. How is righteousness attained? How did the Jews stumble over this?

It is attained by faith in the stone—Jesus Christ. They stumbled over it because they believed the law could save them, and Jesus came and said it's by faith in him alone. He fulfilled the law when they couldn't. All they had to do is trust in his righteousness, but they rejected him.

3. Who is the stone? (see 1 Pet. 2:6-7) How do they reject the stone? Why do they stumble over it?

Jesus Christ is the stone. They crucify him. They expected a different king and a different Messiah, so they missed him completely.

4. **Review:** In last week's passage, what did Paul say was the basis for salvation from beginning of time until now? How were people saved? How does verses 30-33 continue that argument?

From the beginning of time until now, people have been saved by faith in God's work on their behalf. Like Abraham, it's credited to them as righteousness.

Apply – How does this change me?

1. This passage brings up two seemingly competing doctrines: divine sovereignty and human responsibility. How would you explain to someone why they aren't at odds, based on these verses?

(This is subjective based on the group and person, so take all you've learned and read and ask your class to explain this, starting with you as the leader.)

Read this quote to help:

"Few preachers can have maintained this balance better than Charles Simeon of Cambridge in the first half of the nineteenth century. He lived and ministered at a time when the Arminian-Calvinist controversy was bitter, and he warned his congregation of the danger of forsaking Scripture in favour of a theological system. 'When I come to a text which speaks of election', he said to J. J. Guernsey in 1831, 'I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question.'⁷⁴ In defence of his commitment to both extremes, Simeon would sometimes borrow an illustration from the Industrial Revolution: 'As

⁷⁴ *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, ed. William Carus (Hatchard, 1848), pp. 674f.

*wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve a common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally subserve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation.*⁷⁵¹

2. **Large Group:** Read Romans 1 and Romans 3:23. How do these verses help explain why God is just in his purposes in Romans 9:13-33?
3. **Small Group:** Turn to someone next to you and answer this question: If someone were to ask you, how do you know God is good and just? How would you use these verses to summarize God's character?
4. **As a class, look up Job 40:1-5.** What does Job learn about God in his suffering? Based on this text in Romans and Job's life, what do you think is the difference between doubt and questioning God?

⁷⁵ Preface to the *Horae Homileticae* in 21 volumes (1832), p. 5.

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*](#), *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 268–278.

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Do you know anyone who is trying to pursue righteousness by the law, or by being a good person? How would you explain the gospel to them if they said “I’m a good person. I know God will weigh my good in my favor”?
2. Is there anything about your view of God or yourself that needs to change based on this passage?

Teacher Tip in preparing your lesson. Try to summarize what Paul is saying in a few sentences before you read the commentary. That will help anchor your lesson, whether you’re discussion style or lecture style. Then use the commentary to reinforce what you have personally learned from the text. The John Stott commentary below is a supplement to the F.F. Bruce commentary you were given in August.

Commentary: Taken from John Stott’s commentary on Romans 9:1-13

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven’t received yours.

Question 2: Is God unjust? (14–18).

Granted that God’s promise has not failed, but has been fulfilled in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and in their spiritual lineage, is not ‘God’s purpose according to election’ intrinsically unjust? To choose some for salvation and pass by others looks like a breach of elementary justice. Is it? *What then shall we say? Is God unjust?* Paul’s immediate retort is *Not at all!* (14). He then goes on to explain. *For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,*

and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' (15). Thus Paul's way of defending God's justice is to proclaim his mercy. It sounds like a complete *non sequitur*. But it is not. It simply indicates that the question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy. For salvation *does not ... depend on man's desire or effort*, that is, on anything we want or strive for, *but on God's mercy* (16).

Having quoted God's word to Moses (15),³² Paul now quotes his word to Pharaoh (17),³³ although it is noteworthy that he writes of what *the Scripture says to Pharaoh*, since to him what God says and what Scripture says are synonyms: '*I raised you up for this very purpose*, that is, 'brought you on the stage of history',³⁴ *that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth*' (17). Indeed, the refrain in the narrative of Pharaoh and the plagues is 'so that you may know there is no-one like the LORD our God'.³⁵

Paul sees these divine words to Moses (15) and Pharaoh (17), both recorded in Exodus, as complementary, and sums them up in verse 18: *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy* (the message to Moses), *and he hardens whom he wants to harden* (the message to Pharaoh). Dr Leon Morris rightly comments: 'Neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who had not first hardened himself.'³⁶ That Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and refused to humble himself is made plain in the story.³⁷ So God's hardening of him was a judicial act, abandoning him to his own stubbornness,³⁸ much as God's wrath against the ungodly is expressed by 'giving them over' to their own depravity (1:24, 26, 28). The same combination of human obstinacy and divine judgment in the hardening of the heart is seen in God's word to Isaiah ('Make the heart of this people calloused'), which Jesus applied to his own teaching ministry, and Paul applied to his.³⁹

So God is not unjust. The fact is, as Paul demonstrated in the early chapters of his letter, that all human beings are sinful and guilty in God's sight (3:9, 19), so that nobody deserves to be saved. If therefore God hardens some, he is not being unjust, for that is what their sin deserves. If, on the other hand, he has compassion on some, he is not being unjust, for he is dealing with them in mercy. The wonder is not that some are saved and others not, but that anybody is saved at all. For we deserve nothing at God's hand but judgment. If we receive what we deserve (which is judgment), or if we receive what we do not

³² Ex. 33:19.

³³ Ex. 9:16.

³⁴ Denney, p. 662.

³⁵ *E.g.* Ex. 8:10; *cf.* Ezk. 6:7, 14, *etc.*

³⁶ Morris (1988), p. 361.

³⁷ *E.g.* Ex. 4:22ff.; 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 17, 27, 34f.; 10:3, 16; 11:9; 13:15; 14:5.

³⁸ *E.g.* Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17.

³⁹ Is. 6:9f.; Mt. 13:13ff.; Mk. 4:11f.; Jn. 12:39f.; Acts 28:25ff.

deserve (which is mercy), in neither case is God unjust. If therefore anybody is lost, the blame is theirs, but if anybody is saved, the credit is God's. This antinomy contains a mystery which our present knowledge cannot solve; but it is consistent with Scripture, history and experience.

Question 3: Why does God still blame us? (19–29).

If salvation is due entirely to God's will (which it is, as stated twice in verse 15 and twice more in verse 18), and if we do not resist his will (which we do not, and indeed could not), *one of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'* (19). In other words, is it fair of God to hold us accountable to him, when he makes the decisions? To this question Paul makes three responses, all of which concern who God is. Most of our problems arise and seem insoluble because our image of God is distorted.

First, *God has the right of a potter over his clay* (20–21). Paul's first response to his critic's two questions is to pose three counter-questions which all concern our identity. They ask whether we know who we are (*Who are you, O man ...?* 20a), what kind of relationship we think exists between us and God, and what attitude to him we consider appropriate to this relationship. Moreover, all three counter-questions emphasize the gulf which yawns between a human being and God (20a), between a crafted object and the craftsman (between *what is formed* and *him who formed it*, 20b), and between a *lump of clay* and *the potter* who is shaping it (21). Since this is the relationship between us, do we really think it fitting for a human being to *talk back to God* (20a), for art to ask the artist why he has made it as he has (20b), or for a pot to challenge the potter's right to shape the same lump of clay into pottery for different uses (21)?

We need to recall the Old Testament background to Paul's questions. The village potter at his wheel was a familiar figure in Palestine, and his craft was used to illustrate several different truths. For example, Jeremiah watches the potter's skill and determination in re-shaping a vessel which has been spoiled.⁴⁰ This is not in Paul's mind here, however. He is alluding rather to two texts in Isaiah. The first contains God's striking complaint to Israel, 'You turn things upside down.' That is, refusing to allow God to be God, they even attempt to reverse roles, as if the potter had become the pot and the pot the potter.⁴¹ In the second text God pronounces a 'woe' to 'him who quarrels with his Maker', to him who is himself only a potsherd, yet challenges the potter to explain what he is making.⁴²

What then is Paul condemning? Some commentators betray their embarrassment at this point, and others are brash enough to reject Paul's teaching. 'It is the weakest point in the whole epistle,' declares C. H. Dodd.⁴³ But

⁴⁰ Je. 18:1ff.

⁴¹ Is. 29:16.

⁴² Is. 45:9.

⁴³ Dodd, p. 159.

we need to draw a distinction. Paul is not censuring someone who asks sincerely perplexed questions, but rather someone who 'quarrels' with God, who talks back (20) or answers back (RSV). Such a person manifests a reprehensible spirit of rebellion against God, a refusal to let God be God and acknowledge his or her true status as creature and sinner. Instead of such presumption we need, like Moses, to keep our distance, take off our shoes in recognition of the holy ground on which we stand, and even hide our face from him.⁴⁴ Similarly, we need, like Job, to put our hand over our mouth, confess that we tend to speak things we do not understand, despise ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.⁴⁵ Job had been right to reject the traditional claptrap of his so-called 'comforters', and in his dialogue with them he had been in the right and they in the wrong.⁴⁶ Where Job had gone wrong was in daring to 'contend' with the Almighty, to 'accuse' him and attempt to 'correct' him.⁴⁷

But still the whole story has not yet been told. For human beings are not merely lumps of inert clay, and this passage well illustrates the danger of arguing from an analogy. To liken humans to pottery is to emphasize the disparity between us and God. But there is another strand in biblical teaching which affirms not our unlikeness but our likeness to God, because we have been created in his image, and because we still bear it (though distorted) even since the fall.⁴⁸ As God's image-bearers, we are rational, responsible, moral and spiritual beings, able to converse with God, and encouraged to explore his revelation, to ask questions and to think his thoughts after him. In consequence, there are occasions in which biblical characters who have fallen on their faces before God are told to stand up on their feet again, especially to receive God's commission.⁴⁹ In other words, there is a right kind of prostration before God, which is a humble acknowledgment of his infinite greatness, and a wrong kind which is a grovelling denial of our human dignity and responsibility before him.

Returning to Romans, Paul is not wishing to stifle genuine questions. After all, he has been asking and answering questions throughout the chapter and indeed the whole letter. No, 'it is the God-defying rebel and not the bewildered seeker after the truth whose mouth he [sc. Paul] so peremptorily shuts'.⁵⁰

Paul's emphasis in this paragraph is that as the potter has the right to shape his clay into vessels for different purposes, so God has the right to deal with

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

⁴⁴ Ex. 3:5f.

⁴⁵ Jb. 40:4; 42:3, 6.

⁴⁶ Jb. 42:7f.

⁴⁷ Jb. 40:2; *cf.* 1:22; 2:10.

⁴⁸ *E.g.* Gn. 9:6.

⁴⁹ *E.g.* Ezk. 1:28; 2:1f.; Dn. 10:7ff.

sc Seneca

⁵⁰ Bruce, p. 179.

fallen humanity according to both his wrath and his mercy, as he has argued in verses 10–18. ‘In the sovereignty here asserted,’ writes Hodge, ‘it is God as moral governor, and not God as creator, who is brought to view.’ It is nowhere suggested that God has the right to ‘create sinful beings in order to punish them’, but rather that he has the right to ‘deal with sinful beings according to his good pleasure’, either to pardon or to punish them.⁵¹

Secondly, *God reveals himself as he is* (22–23). The apostle continues to demonstrate that God’s freedom to show mercy to some and to harden others is fully compatible with his justice. The burden of his theodicy is that we must allow God to be God, not only in renouncing every presumptuous desire to challenge him (20–21), but also in assuming that his actions are without exception in harmony with his nature. For God is always self-consistent and never self-contradictory. He determines to be himself and to be seen to be himself.

Verses 22 and 23, which are parallel to each other, plainly express this theme. The word that is common to both is the verb ‘to make known’. Verse 22 speaks of the revelation of God’s *wrath and power ... to the objects of his wrath*, and verse 23 of the revelation of *the riches of his glory ... to the objects of his mercy*. The NIV also makes both verses begin with the same rhetorical question (*What if God ...? What if he ...?*), which in both cases is left unanswered. Their meaning is readily intelligible, however. Paul is implying that if God acts in perfect accordance with his wrath and mercy, there can be no possible objection.

Although the structure of the two verses is the same, there are also significant differences to be noted. First, God is said to bear *with great patience the objects of his wrath*, instead of visiting it upon evildoers immediately. The implication seems to be that his forbearance in delaying the hour of judgment will not only keep the door of opportunity open longer, but also make the ultimate outpouring of his wrath the more dreadful. This was so in the case of Pharaoh, and it is still the situation today as we wait for the Lord’s return.⁵² Secondly, although Paul describes the objects of God’s mercy as those *whom he prepared in advance for glory* (23), he describes the objects of God’s wrath simply as *prepared for destruction*, ready and ripe for it, without indicating the agency responsible for this preparation. Certainly God has never ‘prepared’ anybody for destruction; is it not that by their own evildoing they prepare themselves for it?

There is a third difference between verses 22 and 23. Although they are complementary, NIV seems to be right in making verse 23 dependent on verse 22: *What if God, choosing to show his wrath ... bore with great patience the objects of his wrath ...? What if he did this in order to make the riches of his*

⁵¹ Hodge, p. 319.

NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).

⁵² 2 Pet. 3:3ff.; cf. Rom. 2:4.

NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).

glory known ...? The double question implies that this is indeed what God did. That is, the revelation of his wrath to the objects of his wrath was with a view to the revelation of his glory to the objects of his mercy. The preeminent disclosure will be of the riches of God's glory; and the glory of his grace will shine the more brightly against the sombre background of his wrath. 'Glory' is of course shorthand for the final destiny of the redeemed, in which the splendour of God will be shown to and in them, as first they are transformed and then the universe (*cf.* 8:18f.).

So God's two actions, summed up in verse 18 as 'showing mercy' and 'hardening', have now been traced back to his character. It is because he is who he is that he does what he does. And although this does not solve the ultimate mystery why he prepares some people in advance for glory and allows others to prepare themselves for destruction, yet both are revelations of God, of his patience and wrath in judgment and above all of his glory and mercy in salvation.

Paul is responding to the question 'Why does God still blame us?' (19). He now gives a third explanation. It is that *God foretold these things in Scripture* (24–29). Among the objects of God's mercy, whom he has prepared in advance for glory (23), Paul now includes *even us*, himself and his readers, *whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles* (24). For God's way of dealing with Jews and Gentiles was another illustration of his 'purpose in election' (11) and had been clearly foretold in Old Testament Scripture. In verses 25–26 Paul quotes two texts from Hosea, to explain God's amazing inclusion of the Gentiles, and then in verses 27–29 two texts from Isaiah, to explain his equally amazing reduction of Jewish inclusion to a remnant.

The background to the Hosea texts was Hosea's marriage to his 'adulterous wife', Gomer, together with their three children whose names symbolized God's judgment on the unfaithful northern kingdom of Israel. He told them to call their second child, a daughter, 'Lo-Ruhamah' ('not loved') because, he said, 'I will no longer show love to the house of Israel.'⁵³ He then told them to call their third child, a boy, 'Lo-Ammi' ('not my people') because, he added, 'you are not my people, and I am not your God'.⁵⁴ Yet God went on to promise that he would reverse the situation of rejection implicit in the children's names. These are the texts Paul quotes.

*²⁵I will call them "my people" who are not my people;
and I will call her "my loved one" who is not my loved one',⁵⁵*

and,

⁵³ Ho. 1:6.

⁵⁴ Ho. 1:9.

⁵⁵ Ho. 2:23.

*²⁶It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them,
“You are not my people,”
they will be called “sons of the living God”.*⁵⁶

In order to understand Paul’s handling of these texts, we need to remember that, according to the New Testament, Old Testament prophecies often have a threefold fulfilment. The first is immediate and literal (in the history of Israel), the second intermediate and spiritual (in Christ and his church), and the third ultimate and eternal (in God’s consummated kingdom). A good example is the prophecies of the rebuilding of the temple. Here, however, the prophecy takes the form of God’s promise in mercy to overturn an apparently hopeless situation, to love again those he had declared unloved, and to welcome again as his people those he had said were not. The immediate and literal application was to Israel in the eighth century BC, repudiated and judged by Yahweh for apostasy, but promised a reconciliation and reinstatement.

Paul the apostle, however, is shown that God’s promise has a further and gospel fulfilment in the inclusion of the Gentiles. They had been ‘separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus’, Paul continues, ‘you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ ... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.’⁵⁷ The apostle Peter also applies Hosea’s prophecy to the Gentiles.⁵⁸ Their inclusion is a marvellous reversal of fortunes by God’s mercy. The outsiders have been welcomed inside, the aliens have become citizens, and the strangers are now beloved members of the family.

Next Paul turns from Hosea to Isaiah, and so from the inclusion of the Gentiles to the exclusion of the Jews, apart from a remnant. The historical background to the two Isaiah texts is again one of national apostasy in the eighth century BC, although it now relates to the southern kingdom of Judah. The ‘sinful nation’ has forsaken Yahweh and has been judged through an Assyrian invasion, so that the whole country lies desolate and only a few survivors are left.⁵⁹ God goes on to promise, however, that Assyria will be punished for its arrogance, and that a believing remnant will return to the Lord.⁶⁰ Indeed, the name of Isaiah’s son symbolized this promise, as Shear-Jashub means ‘a remnant will return’.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ho. 1:10.

⁵⁷ Eph. 2:12f., 19.

⁵⁸ 1 Pet. 2:10.

⁵⁹ Is. 1:4ff.

⁶⁰ Is. 10:12ff.

⁶¹ Is. 7:3.

²⁷*Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:*

*'Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea,
only the remnant will be saved.*

²⁸*For the Lord will carry out
his sentence on earth with speed and finality.'*⁶²

²⁹*It is just as Isaiah said previously:*

*'Unless the Lord Almighty
had left us descendants,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah.'*⁶³

The significance of both texts lies in the contrast they contain between the majority and the minority. In verse 27 (quoting Is. 10:22) it is said that the number of the Israelites will be like the sand by the sea. This was God's promise to Abraham after his surrender of Isaac, although he added the second metaphor, 'as the stars in the sky'.⁶⁴ But in comparison with the countless number of Israelites, like stars and grains of sand, only a remnant would be saved, the Israel within Israel (6). Similarly, in verse 29, out of the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah only a handful was spared, in fact only Lot and his two daughters.

By bringing the Hosea and Isaiah texts together, Paul provides Old Testament warrant for his vision. On the one hand, God has called us, he writes, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles (24). So there is a fundamental Jewish-Gentile solidarity in God's new society. On the other hand, Paul is conscious of the serious imbalance between the size of the Gentile participation and the size of the Jewish participation in the redeemed community. As Hosea prophesied, multitudes of Gentiles, formerly disenfranchised, have now been welcomed as the people of God. As Isaiah prophesied, however, the Jewish membership was only a remnant of the nation, so small in fact as to constitute not the inclusion of Israel but its exclusion, not its acceptance but its 'rejection' (11:15). Jesus himself had foretold this situation, when he said: 'I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside...'⁶⁵

Question 4: What then shall we say in conclusion? (30–33).

⁶² Is. 10:22f.

⁶³ Is. 1:9.

⁶⁴ Gn. 22:17; cf. 15:5.

⁶⁵ Mt. 8:11f.

Paul's fourth and final question, repeated from verse 14, is addressed to himself. In the light of the argument he has been developing, what conclusion would it be legitimate to draw? In particular, faced with the unbelief of the majority of Israel and the minority status of believing Israel, how have these things come about? In response, Paul begins with a description, continues with an explanation, and ends with a biblical confirmation.

The situation he describes is completely topsy-turvy. On the one hand, *the Gentiles* (better 'Gentiles' without the definite article), *who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith* (30). To describe pagans as 'not pursuing righteousness' is a major understatement. Most of them at least are godless and self-centred, going their own way, lovers of themselves, of money and pleasure, rather than lovers of God and of goodness.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, they obtained what they did not pursue. Indeed, when they heard the gospel of justification by faith, the Holy Spirit worked in them so powerfully that they 'laid hold' of it almost with violence (*katalambanō*) by faith. *But Israel, on the other hand, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it* (31). Israel's pursuit of righteousness was almost proverbial. They were imbued with a religious and moral zeal which some would call fanaticism. Why, then, did they not 'attain' it? Paul uses a different verb (*phthanō*), meaning to 'reach' or 'arrive at'. And the reason they did not arrive is that they were pursuing an impossible goal. Paul anticipates what he will say in the next verse by setting over against the Gentiles' *righteousness* that is by faith what he calls *a law of righteousness*, which must be a reference to Torah viewed as a law to be obeyed. Here, then, is Paul's description of the upside-down religious situation of his day. The Jews who pursued righteousness never reached it; the Gentiles who did not pursue it laid hold of it.

But why was this so? And with regard to the Jews who did not arrive, *why not?* Significantly, Paul's answer on this occasion makes no reference to God's 'purpose in election' (11), but instead attributes Israel's failure to arrive to her own folly: *because they pursued it not by faith* (which is how the Gentiles laid hold of it, 30) *but as if it were by works*, that is, as if the accumulation of works-righteousness were God's way of salvation. So *they stumbled over the 'stumbling-stone' (proskomma, 32)*. What Paul means by this is not in doubt, since he uses the same imagery (although a different vocabulary) elsewhere. In particular, he calls the proclamation of Christ crucified 'a stumbling-block (*skandalon*) to Jews',⁶⁷ and refers also to 'the offence (*skandalon*) of the cross'.⁶⁸ And why do people stumble over the cross? Because it undermines our self-righteousness. For 'if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ

⁶⁶ 2 Tim. 3:1ff.

⁶⁷ 1 Cor. 1:23.

⁶⁸ Gal. 5:11.

died for nothing'.⁶⁹ That is, if we could gain a righteous standing before God by our own obedience to his law, the cross would be superfluous. If we could save ourselves, why should Christ have bothered to die? His death would have been redundant. The fact that Christ died for our sins is proof positive that we cannot save ourselves. But to make this humiliating confession is an intolerable offence to our pride. So instead of humbling ourselves, we 'stumble over the stumbling-stone'.

It only remains for the apostle to provide biblical support for what he has written (33). Like Peter in his first letter,⁷⁰ he brings together two rock-sayings from Isaiah. But Paul goes further than Peter and conflates them. The first and final phrases he quotes are from Isaiah 28:16: *See, I lay in Zion a stone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame*. In between these, however, the other two phrases come from Isaiah 8:14: *a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall*. The primary affirmation is that God himself has laid down a solid rock or stone. It is, of course, Jesus Christ. He boldly applied to himself the prophecy of Psalm 118: 'the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'.⁷¹ In addition, 'no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ'.⁷² So everybody has to decide how to relate to this rock which God has laid down. There are only two possibilities. One is to put our trust in him, to take him as the foundation of our lives and build on him. The other is to bark our shins against him, and so to stumble and fall.

Paul began this chapter with the paradox of Israel's privilege and prejudice (1–5). How can her unbelief be explained?

It is not because God is unfaithful to his promises, for he has kept his word in relation to the Israel within Israel (6–13).

It is not because God is unjust in his 'purpose according to election', for neither his having mercy on some nor his hardening of others is incompatible with his justice (14–18).

It is not because God is unfair to blame Israel or hold human beings accountable, for we should not answer him back, and in any case he has acted according to his own character and according to Old Testament prophecy (19–29).

It is rather because Israel is proud, pursuing righteousness in the wrong way, by works instead of faith, and so has stumbled over the stumbling-block of the cross (30–33).

Thus this chapter about Israel's unbelief begins with God's purpose of election (6–29) and concludes by attributing Israel's fall to her own pride (30–

⁶⁹ Gal. 2:21.

⁷⁰ 1 Pet. 2:6, 8.

⁷¹ Ps. 118:22; Mk. 12:10; cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7.

⁷² 1 Cor. 3:11.

33). In the next chapter Paul calls her ‘a disobedient and obstinate people’ (10:21).

Liberal commentators are not lacking who insist that, by ascribing Jewish unbelief now to God’s purpose of election and now to Israel’s own blindness and arrogance, the apostle was contradicting himself. But that is a shallow conclusion, and inadmissible to anybody who accepts Paul’s apostolic authority. No, ‘antinomy’ is the right word to use, not ‘contradiction’. Dr Lloyd-Jones sums up Paul’s position in these words: ‘In verses 6 to 29 he explains why anybody is saved; it is the sovereign election of God. In these verses (30–33) he is showing us why anybody is lost, and the explanation of that is their own responsibility.’⁷³

Few preachers can have maintained this balance better than Charles Simeon of Cambridge in the first half of the nineteenth century. He lived and ministered at a time when the Arminian-Calvinist controversy was bitter, and he warned his congregation of the danger of forsaking Scripture in favour of a theological system. ‘When I come to a text which speaks of election’, he said to J. J. Guerne in 1831, ‘I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question.’⁷⁴ In defence of his commitment to both extremes, Simeon would sometimes borrow an illustration from the Industrial Revolution: ‘As wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve a common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally subserve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man’s salvation.’⁷⁵

Additional Resources:

Podcast: [Knowing Faith: Romans 9 Part 2 with Mike Bird](#)

⁷³ Lloyd-Jones, vol. 9, p. 285.

⁷⁴ *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, ed. William Carus (Hatchard, 1848), pp. 674f.

⁷⁵ Preface to the *Horae Homileticae* in 21 volumes (1832), p. 5.

² John R. W. Stott, [The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World](#), *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 268–278.

Baptist Faith & Message, particularly articles 3, 4, and 5 help talk through these ideas in Romans 9.

Video: [Do Predestination and Free Will Contradict Each Other?](#)

Articles: [Predestination and the Divine Decree](#) by Robert Letham ([The Gospel Coalition has a series of essays on this, election, and human responsibility on this landing page.](#))