

Simple Truth

How Romans 9-11 Declares:

God is Good

Clearing the Muddied Waters of Calvinism



Early Release

Caleb Bulow

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To the late David Gooding, who unknowingly started me on the path of this study when I heard him preach "The Glorious Gospel of Our Blessed God."

May God bless you all.

Release Notes

Let the reader be advised: this version of the book is an early release. Much more is yet to come.

This release focuses on delivering a clear and coherent exposition of Romans 9–11. It remains free of heavy, detailed analysis of the more challenging portions. Its primary aim is to glorify God by helping readers clearly understand Romans 9–11 and recognize that what God has done is good.

It is being published now to offer help sooner rather than later. Lord willing, new sections with detailed support will be added, and the book will be republished in both digital and print editions.

I hope this edition will elicit feedback from readers, enabling me to correct and refine the work. If you are interested in helping improve this book, please follow the link below to my website. There you can leave comments or connect with me through the social media links provided.

As I complete additional chapters, I plan to publish them on my website. If you would like to be notified when new chapters appear, please leave your name and email address on <https://clearwaters.net/god-is-good/>. This will register you to receive an alert when the final version is released. I hope to offer a deeply discounted price on the full edition to those who purchased this early release.

Thank you for taking the time to read this early release. I trust the Lord will richly bless you through it.

Introduction

Is God good?

Yes—of course. This is what we believe, what we have experienced, and what our hearts most deeply desire.

This is precisely why Romans 9 and the chapters around it are so difficult to interpret. We firmly believe that God is good, yet the topics therein raise questions that challenge our ability to comprehend how His actions reveal that goodness.

For example, Romans 8 declares: “Those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” On the surface, the words are clear: God, in His transcendent knowledge, identifies certain individuals and determines they will become like His Son. Yet the message confronts us with a profound difficulty: How is God good in choosing only some for Christ-likeness rather than extending that destiny to all?

Romans 9 then raises the issue of God's election of Jacob over Esau. God told Rebekah that the older twin would serve the younger—not because Esau had forfeited his place or Jacob had earned it, for neither had done anything yet. The reason was solely God's mysterious purpose. How is that fair? And as if that were not enough, the chapter quotes God boldly declaring to Israel: “I loved Jacob but hated Esau.” How is God good in loving only some and not all?

The chapter then addresses God's hardening of Pharaoh to display His power—a concept that by Itself is hard to reconcile with divine goodness. Yet if we dare question how God can judge Pharaoh for being what He formed him to be, Romans 9 answers bluntly: who are you to challenge the Creator? Though

we affirm God's absolute right to do as He pleases, the question remains: How is His treatment of Pharaoh good?

To resolve this paradox, one group of Bible students argues that our struggle arises from our limited ability to comprehend God's thoughts and ways. His purpose of selecting some for salvation and hardening others may seem harsh or unjust to us, but we lack the intellectual capacity to fully understand. We must accept that God acts as He pleases for His glory and believe it is good—even if we cannot fully grasp it.

Unwilling to accept such an austere view of God, an opposing group insists the difficulty lies not in God's ways but in our misunderstanding of Scripture. The impression that God selects only a few and hardens the rest arises from misreading the text. We must dig beneath the surface to uncover what God is truly doing—it simply cannot be that He arbitrarily chose some and abandoned the rest, for He is good.

One camp affirms: God is good, even if we cannot fully understand how His actions are good. The other responds: God is good, but we have not yet rightly understood the Scriptures. Both sides struggle to explain God's goodness in these passages. While centuries of study have brought progress for each, it is evident that both still fall short of Paul's understanding.

Paul clearly grasped what God was doing. He did not conclude his discussion in confusion but erupted in praise and wonder at God's wisdom (Rom. 11:33–36). He acknowledged that God's ways are unsearchable, yet he beheld the riches of His wisdom and knowledge. Somehow, the challenging themes of Romans 9 led Paul to marvel at God's goodness in Romans 11.

When we genuinely share Paul's response—moving from struggle to awe and praise—we will know we have begun to grasp what he grasped. Regardless of which theological camp we lean toward, our goal must be to uncover the reality of God's goodness and wisdom as presented in Romans 9–11. It is a lofty goal; we may never fully attain it. Yet we must believe that God inspired these chapters to reveal His goodness, not to conceal it. Therefore, we can approach this passage with confidence that He desires us to understand and that He will reveal Himself as we seek Him.

We know God is good, and we long to grow deeper in that knowledge. For centuries, Romans 9–11 has been a fierce battleground, its truths being clouded by theological controversy. The purpose of this book is to make meaningful progress in clearing away the confusion—clearing the muddied waters of Calvinism—and to uncover afresh the rich goodness of God in all He has done.

Roadmap

When approaching passages that contain controversial doctrines, it is tempting to jump straight to the key verses and dive into the debate. After all, it can feel like unnecessary effort to start at the beginning and work through the non-controversial, easy-to-understand verses before reaching the intriguing and disputed ones. Yet focusing on the striking verses while gliding past the surrounding text is literally taking those verses out of context. This is a travesty of approach in Bible study, because—as every serious Bible student knows—the three most important keys to rightly interpreting a verse are context, context, and context.

For this reason, we will adopt the approach of beginning at the start of the passage and working steadily through it—giving the same careful attention to the straightforward verses as to the controversial ones. Our guiding assumption is that the Holy Spirit inspired the sacred text not as a collection of isolated bullet points, but as a coherent, unified message. The simple verses are therefore just as integral to the message as the difficult ones. To rightly understand the hard verses, we must first grasp the easy ones and thereby discern the main thrust of the passage. That central message provides the essential framework for interpreting the more challenging portions.

So we will trace the thought flow of the passage as the surest way to uncover the true meaning of its controversial points.

Thought Flow

I am indebted to the late Dr. David Gooding for his emphasis on the importance of thought flow. He often pointed out that the key to understanding a passage lies in identifying its structure, pattern, and thought flow. He would say, “These three, but the greatest of these is thought flow.” I learned from him that when a student discerns the coherent flow of thought, they can have confidence they have grasped the Author's intent. Many of his teachings are available at <https://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/>

Tracing thought flow simply means identifying a coherent progression from one paragraph to the next. This approach contrasts with viewing the passage as a loose collection of verses—some supporting our views, others challenging them. Seeking thought flow assumes the Author had a unified message, with each verse contributing to the central line of reasoning.

In ordinary books we expect the topic of paragraph A to lead logically into B, and B into C. If the topics seem disconnected or unrelated, we conclude either the author has lost coherence or we have misunderstood. When reading Scripture, we know the Author is never incoherent. Therefore, if the paragraphs appear disconnected, the problem lies with our understanding, and we have work to do.

Intent

This book's goal is to trace the progression of thought from the opening question in Romans 9 to the exuberant conclusion in Romans 11. It is not an attack on Calvinism or Arminianism. Plenty of books already critique both systems, and I have no

need to join that fray—nor am I sufficiently versed in either to dismantle them effectively. My sole aim is to bring clarity to the Word of God in a passage long clouded by intense theological debate.

After all, Romans 9–11 is meant to clarify God's plan and work across the ages—not to generate confusion or debate. Its purpose is to lead us into awe and wonder at His wisdom, not to leave us bewildered by His mysterious purposes. A genuine understanding of this passage should both encourage and humble us before our God.

Structure

May the reader be advised that this book consists of three main sections. The first is introductory material and is the portion you are reading now.

The second section traces the train of thought through Romans 9–11. Its primary aim is to present the passage plainly and comprehensively, faithfully recreating the progression of Paul's reasoning. It addresses difficulties as they arise, but only to the extent needed to clarify the text's meaning. The main goal is to provide the reader with a clear grasp of what Paul is saying.

The third section delves deeper into the more challenging portions, drawing out “nuggets” that extend beyond the main train of thought, offering additional insights that may prove helpful. In many cases, it provides detailed support for the interpretations presented in the second section, serving as further evidence that those conclusions are not the product of an overactive imagination but are firmly grounded in legitimate biblical reasoning.

A fourth section, if there is one, will support the word definitions presented earlier. It will contain lists of verses containing the Greek or Hebrew terms in question—some lists will be exhaustive, others limited to the key passages from which the definitions were derived. These lists are for the reader's convenience and to demonstrate that the definitions were derived with a serious effort at thoroughness.

Definitions

In this book I present definitions for a number of Greek and Hebrew words. Some are drawn directly from lexicons, but many I derived by examining the scriptural contexts in which the words appear. The third and fourth sections will provide the verses and contexts that shaped my understanding.

This is not to suggest my definitions are unique. In most, if not all cases, they align with the standard lexicons and do not diverge radically. While I have access to reliable lexicons, I have taken the time to derive my own definitions—especially for words where theological bias might influence lexical entries. Examining how Scripture itself uses a word gives me far greater confidence in my understanding of its meaning within a given context.

Sources

One final note before we begin. A critique of my previous book was regarding the absence of a bibliography. This book likewise lacks one. The reason is straightforward: the material presented here is entirely my own. My approach to studying Romans 9–11 has been to read the text, ponder it deeply, and pray—relying primarily on Bible word-search tools and

conversations with fellow believers rather than researching other authors' conclusions.

This is not to say I have avoided other authors entirely. I did read them, but not to shape my conclusions. I read them afterward to check whether my findings aligned with theirs or if I had strayed far from the truth. I was encouraged to discover that in many cases my conclusions were not radically unique—others had arrived at similar insights.

Obviously, any truly legitimate interpretation must come from the Author Himself. While I invested significant time in study and reflection, ultimate understanding comes from the Lord. There is always the risk that pride has clouded my grasp of what He has revealed. Yet even if some areas fall short, I believe the majority of this work will prove helpful in advancing our collective understanding of this vital passage.

Section 2

Romans 8: God is For Us

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

People often quote this well-known verse to comfort friends in hardship, assuring them that God will make everything turn out well in the end. But that is not Paul's meaning. He wrote, "All things work together for good"—not "all things will turn out well in the end." His point is that God employs all events to produce good for those who love Him.

For example, if someone's house burned down, Paul was not promising a better house in the end for those who love God. Rather, God would use even that tragedy to produce a specific good in their lives. The promise is not that circumstances will ultimately turn out well, but that God will orchestrate them to yield a particular good for His people.

God's purpose is to produce the specific good mentioned in the very next verse.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Romans 8:29

Notice the destination God has set for His people: to become like His Son. The Lord Jesus is righteous, whole, and perfectly secure in His relationship with the Father. God orchestrates all things—both good and bad—to produce this very likeness of His Son in those whom He foreknew.

Foreknowledge

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Romans 8:29

A common misinterpretation holds that God, from eternity past, by His foreknowledge predestined certain individuals for salvation. In time, as they appeared in history, He called them with the gospel, justified them, and will one day glorify them.

At first glance, this interpretation seems faithful to the text. A closer examination, however, reveals additions not present in the passage: the idea of “eternity past,” of predestination unto salvation, and also that God selected only some of those He foreknew. Eternity past, or from the beginning of time, simply is not explicitly mentioned in the verse. The predestination is specifically unto the likeness of His Son, not unto salvation. And the text specifically says, “those whom He foreknew He also predestined...”—identifying the foreknown with the predestined, without limitation. In other words, all who He foreknew, He predestined. Though subtle, these additions significantly alter the verse's trajectory.

Some Bible students—being uncomfortable with the notion that God predestines only a limited group to salvation—have proposed an alternative interpretation.

God, in eternity past, foreknew which people would believe and predestined them for salvation. In due time, as these people appeared in history, He called them with the gospel and justified them. And one day, in the future, He will glorify them.

This interpretation not only shares assumptions with the previous one but adds another: that God's foreknowledge concerns whether individuals would believe—in other words, that God knows ahead of time what people will do. Yet the original language indicates something more than mere knowledge of future actions: it is knowledge of who people are.

The Greek root for “foreknew” in Scripture denotes not mere factual knowledge but intimate, relational knowledge—the personal acquaintance that arises when someone opens themselves to another. Foreknowledge, then, is God's intimate, personal knowledge of certain individuals beforehand—before they have encountered Him or opened themselves to Him.

Jesus demonstrated this kind of prior, intimate knowledge several times in the Gospel of John. Peter's experience is a clear example (John 1:42), as is the Samaritan woman's encounter at the well (John 4:17–18) and Nathanael's meeting with Him.

*Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him,
“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”*

*Nathanael said to Him, “How do You **know** me?”*

*Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you,
when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” John 1:47-48*

Nathanael used the Greek root of “foreknew” when he asked how Jesus knew him. He expressed astonishment that Jesus knew him so deeply and intimately before they had ever met in person. He recognized that Jesus possessed a beforehand intimate knowledge of him.

His encounter vividly illustrates Jesus exercising foreknowledge, even though the term itself does not appear in the passage. His experience was similar to Peter's (John 1:42),

the Samaritan woman's (John 4:17–18), and countless others in the Gospels. In each case, Jesus foreknew them and invited them to Himself.

Paul himself experienced this same reality and may well have had it in mind as he wrote Romans 8:29. On the Damascus road, his encounter revealed that Jesus knew him at a profoundly intimate level.

“And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Acts 26:14-15

Jesus' reference to “kicking against the goads” revealed His intimate knowledge of the hidden recesses of Saul's heart. A goad was a sharp stick used by herdsman to prod stubborn animals in the right direction. Jesus employed this metaphor to describe precisely what Saul was experiencing deep within.

Outwardly, Saul appeared single-minded in his zealous persecution of Jesus' followers. Inwardly, however, in places no one else could see, he felt a sharp, persistent prodding that opposed his actions. He undoubtedly concealed this inner conflict even from his closest companions. Yet the Lord—whom Saul had never met—knew his turmoil intimately.

For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the LORD.

“But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. Isaiah 66:2

Isaiah declared that God takes notice of those who tremble at His word. Like Saul, they begin to recognize the wrongness of their actions before God and how His word condemns them. God turns His attention toward them and sees the deep damage sin has wrought: the hurt and trauma that have wounded them, the lies of darkness that have blinded them, and the bondage of their addictions.

He regards them not to destroy them, but because they are taking His word seriously. He knows that those who heed His word concerning sin will also heed His word concerning salvation. He sets His gaze upon them and knows them at an intimate level long before they ever encounter Him.

It seems reasonable, then, to interpret Romans 8:29 as meaning that God predestined those whom He intimately knew beforehand. This shifts the focus from a distant foreknowledge in eternity past to God's present, personal, intimate acquaintance with individuals before they ever encounter Him.

If this interpretation of “foreknew” holds, then Romans 8:29 presents no abstract or mystical doctrine. Paul is drawing from personal experience: God had intimately known him beforehand. Fully aware of Saul's profound wretchedness, God predestined him to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Scope of Predestined

When God predestines a person, He sets the scope—the boundaries—of their life. The Greek root of “predestine” means to define boundaries or limits. In the Septuagint, it is used literally to describe marking Israel's tribal boundaries in the promised land, and figuratively to describe a person setting a life boundary in taking a vow.

When a person makes a vow, they define a life boundary, setting a new trajectory that either embraces or avoids a particular path. The vow may bring a minor adjustment or a major redirection affecting their entire life's course. In either case—whether small or great—they are establishing a new scope for their life. Thus, the Greek word translated “predestined” means to beforehand set the scope of a person's life.

When God beforehand determines a boundary or limit for a person's life, He defines their future trajectory and scope. Yet the extent to which they enter that scope depends on their submission to Him—as the comparison between Saul and David clearly shows.

Rags to Reign

God pre-set the scope of both Saul and David to become king before either man realized God had taken notice of them. Both came from humble backgrounds, with no personal ambition for the throne. Each became aware of God's purpose only when Samuel anointed him.

Interestingly, both men resisted the people's call to kingship—Saul because he objected to God's will, David because he honored it. When the people demanded Saul as king, he hid among the baggage (1 Sam. 10:22). When David's men urged him to kill Saul and seize the throne, he refused (1 Sam. 26:8–11). Yet despite their resistance, God brought each into the scope He had determined, and both became king in turn.

Yet their outcomes differed dramatically. Saul's choices as king led God to regret making him king (1 Sam. 15:11), and his

kingdom collapsed shortly after his death. David, however, sought to honor the Lord throughout his reign, and God promised him an everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7:15–16).

David entered the scope God had set for him far more fully than Saul did, due to the choices each made during his reign. Thus, while God established the parameters and trajectory of their lives, both men freely operated within that scope as they saw fit.

For these men, God's predestination meant He had set a scope for each life that He would accomplish regardless of opposition. It did not mean He had pre-programmed their choices.

Scope of Blessing

Abram's experience also illustrates God determining a person's future scope. When Abram first encountered God, he discovered that God had already set a destiny for him: “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Abram's role was to become the conduit of blessing to all nations—a wonderful scope God had predetermined.

God's predestination of Abram did not fix every step of his path. Abram made missteps, such as retreating to Egypt during a famine in Canaan instead of trusting God's provision. Yet God remained with him, delivered him from the consequences, and guided him back to Canaan to continue toward the destiny He had prepared.

God's predestination meant He would accompany Abram wherever he went, using every step—good or bad—to fulfill His purpose of blessing all nations through Abraham and his seed. In other words, God would work all things for good.

Sinner to Son

God extends the same kind of predestination to those who tremble at His word—those He has foreknown. Intimately acquainted with the hurts in their hearts, the deceptions in their minds, and the bondage of their addictions, He sets the scope of their lives to reflect the very character of His Son.

The Lord Jesus is a whole and perfect person—not scarred by trauma, torn by hurt, or bound by addiction. He is fully confident in the Father's love, deeply secure in His acceptance, and completely at home in His presence. Except for His nail prints, He stands utterly free from any damage of sin.

Even before they ever encounter Him, God sets a scope for their lives to enter this very likeness of His Son. He knows full well the difficulties He will face in bringing about this supreme good. Yet He is fully able to orchestrate all things—both good and bad—to produce this miraculous transformation in them.

Firstborn

In this passage, Paul unveils God's ultimate reason for saving people: that His Son might be the firstborn among many brethren. Throughout eternity, God desires to dwell in the midst of a people who are holy and pure, confident in His love, secure in His acceptance, and fully at home in His presence (Rev. 21:3–4). His salvation is not merely escape from judgment; He delivers them from sin's corruption and transforms them into the image of His beloved Son, so they may share in the boundless riches of His Son's inheritance.

Sharing in the inheritance is what Esau failed to do. Jacob stole his birthright, and Isaac inadvertently pronounced the blessing upon him—making Jacob the firstborn and channeling

God's blessing through him instead of Esau. Yet even after losing the birthright, Esau could still have shared in the blessing: all he needed was to remain near Jacob, and the blessing would have flowed to him through his brother.

Jesus alone holds the role of firstborn of God. He will inherit all of God's blessings. Yet He will not inherit alone. He will be the firstborn among many brethren, all sharing in God's blessing through Him.

The chief blessing of the inheritance is dwelling in God's presence. Therefore, the only way to enjoy that blessing is to be a whole and perfect person—fully confident in God's love and acceptance. Anything less would leave a person uncertain and fearful in His presence. Thus, God has predestined each one He foreknew to become like the Lord Jesus, so that He may be the firstborn among many brethren.

Call, Justify, Glorify

Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. Romans 8:30

Having beforehand set the scope of conforming these people to the image of His Son, God initiates their journey with a call to salvation, inviting them to believe in His Son. His timing varies for each individual—some bear the burden of guilt from sin longer than others. Yet God, knowing their hearts intimately, chooses the perfect moment to reveal the good news of salvation.

When they believe in His Son and call upon Him, God justifies them, declaring them righteous because they have heeded His word and embraced the gospel's promise.

He then glorifies them. While believers will indeed receive future glorification, this verse uses the aorist tense to depict glorification as a past action with ongoing reality. It refers to a positional glorification—not a change in appearance—as alluded to in the earlier verses of Romans 8.

Glory of Heirs

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. Romans 8:16-17

Being made heirs of God is a glorification of position. God lifts sinners from the degradation of sin and exalts them as co-heirs with Christ—a status surpassing the angels, who are servants, not heirs (Heb. 1:14).

This glorification happens at justification and will culminate when we are received into His presence. Then He will transform our appearance to match what He has made us—sons of God. We now suffer under the corruption of our flesh, but these present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:18

Indeed, the revelation of God's heirs is what all creation eagerly anticipates. Creation itself groans under the bondage of corruption, subjected to futility by God, awaiting the day when His children are liberated from their own bondage. Thus, we witness the ongoing travail and turmoil in the natural world.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Romans 8:19-22

We, who enjoy the first tastes of liberty from corruption through the Spirit within us, groan along with creation, eagerly looking forward to the redemption of our body, when we enter the inheritance and no longer suffer under corruption.

Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. Romans 8:23

This is the hope which we have in our salvation. It is a hope because its full realization remains unseen. But we eagerly look forward to its fulfillment with endurance.

For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Romans 8:24-25

We are not alone in our deep longing to be freed from the corruption of our flesh—the Spirit Himself comes to our aid. He intercedes for us with groanings too profound for words. The Father, who searches every heart, understands the Spirit's mind, for He pleads in perfect harmony with God's will.

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. Romans 8:26-27

This is the context that leads us to Romans 8:28–30. As God’s heirs, we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies. In our weakness, the Spirit helps us, interceding according to God’s will—a purpose centered on delivering us from the corruption of our flesh. And we know that God works all things together for the good He has purposed for those who love Him.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

God has glorified us by making us joint-heirs with Christ—elevated to a position surpassing the angels. Though we have not yet fully entered our inheritance, we are utterly confident that God will orchestrate all things to fulfill His purpose: transforming sinners into the glorious likeness of His righteous Son.

Clearly, God is irrevocably committed to our good. If God is for us, who can stand against us? He will surely deliver us from this corrupted body of flesh. He knows precisely what is

required to accomplish His purpose, and He did not spare His own Son. What will He hold back?

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Romans 8:31-32

This is why Paul was persuaded that nothing could separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:

"For Your sake we are killed all day long;

We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:33-39

Summary

Scripture	Interpretation
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For whom He foreknew...	Those whom God knew intimately beforehand...
...He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...	...He beforehand set their scope to be transformed into the likeness of His Son...
...that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.	...in order to have many people share in the inheritance of His beloved Son.
Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called;	Those whom God set their scope beforehand, He invited to believe in His Son...
whom He called, these He also justified;	...those who believed His promise of the gospel, He counted them as righteous...
and whom He justified, these He also glorified.	...and having declared them righteous, He made them joint heirs with Christ above the angels.

Who can defeat Him in His purpose?

Romans 9: Choosing Israel

Romans 8 culminates in a triumphant crescendo, celebrating the unbreakable, steadfast love of God for His people.

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

The beauty of this passage lies in its unshakeable truth—it's not a fleeting emotional surge from Paul's imagination. The steadfastness of God's love flows logically from His wisdom and purpose. In love, He gave His Son to die for us. In wisdom, He orchestrates all things—even our failures—to produce good. His purpose is to conform those He foreknew to the image of His Son. Given these realities, what could possibly separate us from His love? Who or what could thwart His inexorable purpose?

This truth of God's steadfast love lifted Paul to ecstatic heights of rejoicing. Yet in the very next verse, his joy plummets into profound sorrow and grief. The Israelites—recipients of God's everlasting covenants—had fallen from grace. Those once God's people now stood outside the grace revealed in Christ.

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. Romans 9:1-5

The triumphant declaration of God’s everlasting love in Romans 8 stands true. Yet it confronts a stark reality: the Israelites, once His people, were cut off from Christ. Their ancient privileges had vanished—they stood outside adoption as sons in Christ, the glory had departed their temple, and they were strangers to the new covenant. Rather than serving God, they opposed Him; the promises of blessing and greatness remained unfulfilled. Though Christ came from their lineage, they were not in Him.

What, then, became of God’s “everlasting” love for Israel? He had covenanted with Abraham to be God to him and his descendants forever (Gen. 17:7). Did His word fail?

*But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.
Romans 9:6*

Paul boldly declares that God’s word has not failed. How could he be so confident? To all appearances, God had turned away from the nation of Israel to believers in Christ Jesus. His favor no longer rested on Abraham’s descendants, but on those in Christ. How, then, could Paul insist that God’s word of covenant had not failed?

Some claim God’s word did not fail because He did not abandon the covenant but transferred it from ethnic Israel to Christians—replacing the physical nation with a spiritual one.

For centuries, this view seemed plausible, especially when no physical nation of Israel existed. However, a fundamental problem with this view is that it is simply not the answer Paul provides in this text.

Paul simply states that God's word has not failed. Taken at face value, this means the covenant word to Israel remained in effect when Paul wrote: the Lord was still Israel's God. His relationship with them had indeed changed dramatically, but Paul did not see this as God revoking the covenant from physical Israel.

If God's covenant word to Israel remained in force—and He was still their God—why were they no longer at the center of His blessing? This crucial question Paul addresses in two parts. In Romans 9 he explains Israel's historical standing before God; in chapter 11, he will address their current status as a nation. In both, his argument demands a deep familiarity with Israel's historical background to be fully grasped.

Not all Israel

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, Romans 9:6

Israel's exclusion from the blessings in Christ was not due to any failure in God's word. He constituted them as His people through His word of covenant (Gen. 17:7). Their exclusion did not mean the covenant word had lost its power or failed in its purpose of securing an everlasting relationship.

Rather, the exclusion occurred because not all who are descended from Israel are of Israel. That is, the physical descendants of the patriarch, Israel, weren't of the personality of Israel. Although they were Israel's physical descendants,

many of them didn't have the same nature as their great-great-grandpa but lacked his faith and character.

Who was Israel/Jacob?

Notice how Paul refers to Jacob as Israel—the name God bestowed on him during that night he wrestled with the angel (Gen. 32:24–28). That encounter marked a profound turning point in Jacob's relationship with God.

Before that night, Jacob would stop at nothing to secure God's blessing. He exploited Esau's hunger to con him into selling the birthright, tricked his father into granting him the blessing, vowed a tithe to God in exchange for protection, manipulated Laban's flocks to get the best of his animals, and even wrestled with the angel.

Yet Jacob's best efforts were ultimately works of the flesh. He schemed to manipulate God into blessing him with wealth and a large family. God Himself acknowledged that Jacob had striven with God and man and prevailed (Gen. 32:28). But of what value were these blessings when he faced death at his brother's hand? None of them could be carried into the grave.

That night of wrestling marked Jacob's transformation. He shifted from relying on the works of his flesh to trusting the God who had promised to bless him. In response, God renamed him Israel. From that moment, Israel no longer wrestled to seize God's blessing—but rested in God's promise.

Thus, Jacob was the man who depended on the efforts of his flesh to obtain God's blessing. Israel, however, was the man who learned to trust in God's mercy.

Children of Jacob or Israel?

Israel's physical descendants were, for the most part, not like Israel but like Jacob. They did not rest in God's mercies as Israel learned to do; instead, they relied on their own efforts to secure God's blessing, just as Jacob had. Many were zealous for good works, striving to earn divine favor through their best endeavors. Like Jacob, they achieved some measure of blessing. Yet, also like Jacob, they failed to rest in God's promise. Thus, though they possessed the privileges listed in verses 4–5, they did not possess God Himself.

They were not all like Israel who were descendants of Israel. Many trusted in their own efforts rather than in the mercies of the Lord, as Israel had learned to do. Though God had blessed them as His people, that blessing did not indicate they trusted Him as their father Israel had.

The sad reality is that not all the people of God—the Israelites—were godly. Not all trusted God; not all shared the heart of their father Israel. This is why they stood outside the blessings in Christ. God grants entrance into Christ's blessings through faith, not through best efforts. Thus, the descendants of Israel remained outside of Christ because they continued to trust in their own works.

Children of Flesh

The truth is that the Jews were not children of God merely because they were physical offspring of Abraham.

Nor are 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." Romans 9:7-9

Being physical descendants of Abraham did not automatically make the Israelites God's children. God made this clear when He declared to Abraham that the covenant would continue through Isaac, not Ishmael.

Isaac and Ishmael

When God promised in Genesis 17 to establish His covenant with Abraham's descendants, we might naturally assume both sons—Isaac and Ishmael—would be included. After all, they were both Abraham's offspring.

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Genesis 17:7

Yet Ishmael did not enter the covenant, even though he was Abraham's descendant. The Lord explicitly told Abraham that His covenant would continue through Isaac and his seed. It was Isaac's descendants—not Ishmael's—through whom God would establish His covenant.

God set Ishmael aside because he was not the fulfillment of the original promise to Abraham—Isaac was. Ishmael resulted from Abraham's best efforts to fulfill God's promised blessing, making him a child of the flesh. Isaac, however, came solely through God's miraculous fulfillment of His promise. Thus, Isaac was a child from God.

Like Isaac or Ishmael?

Paul draws a direct parallel between the nation of Israel and these two sons. Many Israelites were children of the flesh, striving to secure God's promised blessing through their best efforts.

As children of the flesh, they despised God's promised Messiah, just as Ishmael mocked the promised son, Isaac (Gen. 21:9). It was impossible for them to both reject the Messiah and share in His blessing. Thus, they were cut off from the blessings in Christ, just as Ishmael was excluded from God's blessings to Isaac.

This was not God abandoning His covenant with Abraham's descendants. Rather, He inaugurated a new covenant in Christ, open to all who believe His promise of salvation. These believers are born again, becoming children of promise. Because many Israelites rejected this promise and remained children of the flesh, they could not enter the blessings reserved for the children of promise.

Election of Jacob

But wait—if Abraham's covenant was intended for the children of promise among his descendants, how did the children of the flesh among them become God's people? Throughout their history—even up to the time of Christ—many Jews were children of the flesh. Yet they were included in Abraham's covenant and called the people of God. How could these children of the flesh qualify for the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? How could they be the people of God when they were children of flesh?

The answer lies in understanding God's choice of Jacob over Esau.

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." Romans 9:10-13

Jacob and Esau provide another example among Abraham's descendants where one brother received God's promised blessing while the other was set aside. Unlike Isaac and Ishmael, however, this was not a case of one being born through fleshly effort and the other through promise. These two were twins—born of the same mother and father—with no difference in lineage. In this case, God's choice of one over the other had nothing to do with heritage.

Moreover, when God declared His choice, neither boy had yet done anything to qualify or disqualify himself. They were still unborn, in their mother's womb. They had performed no actions, made no choices, and had no individual merits or demerits. Undeniably, God's election was based solely on His sovereign purpose.

The Second Precedent

It is important to note that God's purpose was neither arbitrary nor random. According to what He told Rebekah, His sovereign purpose centered on birth order: "the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Since Jacob was the younger twin, he was chosen over Esau.

Many assume God's purpose was to choose the individual Jacob, and that He declared the older would serve the younger only because He foresaw Esau's birth order and chose not to elect him. This, however, is an extrapolation. A more straightforward reading is that God's purpose was simply that the older should serve the younger.

God was establishing a precedent. Normally, the older brother held precedence over the younger. Here, He declared that in certain cases the order could be reversed, with the younger surpassing the elder. This precedent carries profound implications for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:47

Adam was the first man, whose disobedience brought far-reaching ruin upon all humanity. Jesus is the second man, born after Adam, yet infinitely greater—His obedience possesses the power to reverse and redeem the ruin Adam caused.

Returning to Jacob and Esau, observe that God's purpose was not to save the younger twin and condemn the older. Rather, it was that the older would serve the younger. The elder would hold a lower position, while the younger—and his descendants—would be elevated to become God's people, with the elder's line remaining on the same level as other nations.

Remember: being the people of God under Abraham's covenant was not equivalent to being children of God. It meant enjoying the privileges listed in Romans 9:4–5—the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship of God, the promises, and more. Many Israelites, such as King Saul and the sons of Eli,

were not children of God yet still participated in those national privileges.

Thus, God chose Jacob and his descendants as His people—not because they were godly, but to fulfill His purpose that the second would be elevated above the first. He remained faithful to this purpose throughout Israel’s Old Testament history. In Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, God affirms He had faithfully cared for Jacob’s line while turning from and opposing Esau’s descendants. In this sense, He loved Jacob and hated Esau (Mal. 1:2–3).

Emphasis of Works

Before we proceed, a word of caution is in order: we must handle Romans 9:10-13 carefully to avoid misplaced emphasis. It is common to focus on the fact that God chose Jacob before his birth and conclude that God predestines everyone before they are born. A closer reading, however, shows that the true emphasis is on Jacob’s lack of works. Paul stresses that God did not choose Jacob because of any works he had done, but solely because of His own purpose. The detail that Jacob was still unborn serves only as evidence that the choice could not have been based on works—he had done none yet.

The key application is this: God does not choose people on the basis of their works. His decision to make a person His own is an act of grace, not of debt (Rom. 4:4). We will return to this principle in chapter 11.

Contrasting Hate

Let us pause to clarify: when God declared that He “hated Esau,” this did not signify bitter animosity toward Esau personally. Esau still received a meaningful blessing from God

through his father (Gen. 27:38–40), though it was not the covenant blessing of Abraham. Moreover, God granted Esau and his descendants their own territory to inhabit (Deut. 2:5), even if it was not the promised land.

Esau's situation parallels that of Joseph and his ten older brothers. Joseph's brothers, witnessing the special favor their father lavished on Joseph while withholding it from them, may have felt hated by Jacob. In truth, Jacob harbored no animosity toward the ten; the stark contrast in treatment simply made it appear so.

In the same way, God harbored no bitter animosity toward Esau. Rather, He treated Jacob and his descendants as a favored child, while Esau and his line were like a step-child—receiving provision but not the covenant favor. This difference in treatment did not mean Esau's descendants were barred from salvation from sin. God simply designated Jacob's line as His people and never transferred that unique privilege to Esau's descendants. The prophet Malachi was showing the Israelites that God had been faithful to them throughout their history.

Elevated Status

God chose Jacob's descendants not for wholesale salvation, but to elevate them above all other nations. He bestowed upon them the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the service of worship, and the promises (Rom. 9:4). They enjoyed a closer life to God than any other people. Yet despite these extraordinary privileges, most did not enter the blessings in Christ. This was not due to any failure in God's word of covenant.

The reason most Israelites failed to receive Christ is that they were not children of God, but children of the flesh. Like

Jacob before his transformation, they pursued God's blessing through their own efforts. They did not follow the example of Israel, who rested in God's mercy and promise. Though they were physical descendants of Abraham, they lacked the faith of Abraham and thus were not God's children.

Their lack of faith did not disqualify them from being God's people, because God did not choose them based on works. He chose their patriarch Jacob before birth, while still in the womb. Thus, they were His people solely because of God's sovereign purpose: that the older should serve the younger. God remained faithful to this purpose throughout their entire history.

Purpose of God according to election

The phrase "the purpose of God according to election" does not mean that God chose Jacob's descendants for salvation—clearly, not all were saved. Rather, it signifies that God's purpose to bless the younger over the older was determined solely by His sovereign choice (election) and not by any works of Jacob.

God's choice of Jacob was extraordinary. Normally, He rewarded people according to their deeds—blessing those who did right in His sight and judging those who did wickedly. With Jacob's descendants, however, He dealt differently. He committed to be their God regardless of their righteousness. In fact, they proved stiff-necked and rebellious, yet—as Malachi affirms—God remained faithful to them as His people.

Summary

God's word to Israel did not fail. He remained true to His purpose of elevating them above the other nations. Even when they turned to wickedness, He did not discard or fully destroy them in judgment. Instead, He patiently worked with them, seeking to turn them from their rebellion back to Himself. He was faithful to them according to His election of them as His people above all others.

Jacob and his descendants did not earn their position as God's people; God chose them according to His purpose. Yet His intention was far greater than mere favor toward them. Through them, He was accomplishing His grand and marvelous purpose of bringing salvation to the world.

If God remained faithful to His word and purpose for a people who were often unrighteous, how much more will He remain faithful to those in Christ—whom He has justified and declared righteous? Far from disproving God's steadfast love, the nation of Israel proves it.

Being in Christ places us in a far better position than the children of Israel ever enjoyed. We can rest securely in His love and rejoice in the Lord!

Romans 9: Hardening Pharaoh

God's choice of Jacob over Esau naturally raises questions about divine righteousness. Was it fair for God to lavish extraordinary favor on the undeserving younger brother while bypassing the older, who by birthright should have inherited the blessing? Does this seemingly arbitrary selection—one brother elevated to great privilege, the other passed over—imply that God is unjust?

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." Romans 9:14-15

God's Right to Choose

The short answer is simply that God was not unrighteous. God wasn't choosing to grant Jacob and his descendants a free pass from the judgment of their sins; He would still hold each individual accountable based on their response to His word. Rather, He was selecting them for extraordinary displays of mercy and compassion when they deserved wrath and destruction.

God declared to Moses that He would show mercy and compassion to whomever He chose shortly after Israel had fashioned and worshiped the golden calf in blatant defiance (Exodus 32:19). He would have been fully justified in abandoning them and sending them to the promised land without His presence (Exodus 32:3). Yet when Moses interceded, God relented and promised to accompany them

(Exodus 33:14). He had chosen to extend mercy to Israel rather than the judgment they deserved.

In extending mercy, God was not absolving Israel of their sin. Each individual would still face accountability for their actions on the day of judgment (Exodus 32:33–34). In granting mercy, God was withholding the wrath that they so richly deserved, sparing them from destruction and continuing to lead them toward the promised land.

God extended mercy because He chose to—not because He was obligated. Moses’ intercession did not uncover some moral duty that forced God’s hand. After all, the Israelites had fashioned and worshiped the golden calf, openly rejecting the God who had delivered them and knowingly committing a grave offense against Him.

In the face of an inexcusable and blatant offense, the offended party has no moral obligation to show mercy. They may choose to extend it if they wish, but they are never required to do so—they retain the full right to pursue justice. Consequently, God would have been entirely justified in rejecting Israel and abandoning them to destruction. The people would have had no legitimate grounds for complaint.

So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. Romans 9:16

It is a plain and simple fact: creatures who rebel against God have no right to demand mercy from Him. If He grants it, the decision is entirely His own. At Mount Sinai, the Israelites were wholly at God’s mercy—they could neither accuse Him of wrongdoing for withholding mercy nor exert any leverage to compel it. The choice to show mercy belonged solely to Him.

This was precisely the case with Jacob and Esau. God chose Jacob and his descendants to receive extraordinary mercy, extending far greater compassion to Israel than to Esau's descendants, the Edomites. He did not withhold all mercy from Edom, but lavished exceptional favor on the Israelites—not because they deserved it, but solely according to His own choice.

God's extension of mercy to Israel did not obligate Him to show equal mercy to Edom. Choosing to spare one rebel—or one group of rebels—creates no requirement to spare all others, since no rebel has any rightful claim to mercy. God is entirely free to bestow mercy on one people while withholding it from another.

Thus, God was not unrighteous in granting greater mercy to Jacob than to Esau according to His pleasure, for both were rebellious in their own ways. Far from being arbitrary, His choice was not only righteous but profoundly good—a goodness we will uncover as we examine His purposes later in Romans 9.

The Right of Wrath

The corollary to God's granting of mercy is the pouring out of His wrath. Mercy, by definition, is the withholding of deserved wrath. So where mercy is not granted, wrath is released. Thus, if God is righteous in extending exceptional mercy, He is equally righteous in pouring out exceptional wrath.

A notable example of exceptional wrath is Pharaoh. He was not uniquely wicked, just as Jacob was not uniquely godly. Rather, God chose to pour out extraordinary wrath on Pharaoh to accomplish His purposes.

For the Scripture says to the 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. Romans 9:17-18

God's stated purpose was to deliver the Hebrews through such a dramatic demonstration of power that the entire world would recognize the reality of Israel's living God. He fulfilled this purpose by unleashing extraordinary wrath upon a prominent and powerful figure: Pharaoh, the mighty ruler of Egypt.

Raising Pharaoh

Notice God's words to Pharaoh: "I have raised you up". This language suggests more than mere chance; it implies divine intervention in Pharaoh's life, elevating him—perhaps from humble or unexpected origins—to the throne of Egypt. His rise was neither accidental nor coincidental; God Himself orchestrated it.

The man God raised up had utterly rejected His authority from the very start. When Moses first conveyed God's command to release the Israelites, Pharaoh showed no interest in verifying whether the message truly came from God. Instead, he immediately dismissed the Hebrew God's authority and defiantly declared his refusal to obey (Exodus 5:2).

It goes without saying that God had full knowledge of the man's character, and that He had deliberately raised him up to be Pharaoh. God had chosen a rebellious individual for the throne. Had He elevated a more compliant leader, the confrontation—and the resulting plagues—could have been avoided. Yet God intentionally placed this defiant man in power,

and it was upon this man that He poured out extraordinary wrath.

Notice the precise wording in the passage: God did not tell Pharaoh, “For this reason I have hardened you, that I may show My power.” Instead, He declared, “For this reason I have raised you up”. God ordained that a stubborn, rebellious man would occupy the throne—not by creating or implanting that rebellion, but by intervening in the life of such a man and elevating him to power.

It bears repeating: God did not create a stubborn Pharaoh by taking a compliant one and hardening him. Instead, He selected an already stubborn man and elevated him to the throne. Then He hardened him.

Hardening Pharaoh

Since the concept of hardening is frequently misunderstood, it is worth pausing briefly from our progression through Romans 9 to clarify its meaning. The topic merits far more attention than we can give here, so we will revisit it in greater depth later.

In the Exodus account, the primary Hebrew verb translated as 'harden' (chazaq) literally means 'to strengthen' or 'to make firm.' In Pharaoh's case, this 'hardening' referred to a strengthening of his resolve to defy God's command to release the Israelites. The signs and plagues repeatedly challenged that resolve, pressuring him to capitulate. To resist yielding, Pharaoh initially hardened his own heart, doubling down on his refusal. His natural stubbornness, however, was limited in its capacity to sustain him against the mounting evidence of God's power. Eventually, God Himself strengthened Pharaoh's heart—

reinforcing his resolve—so that the full series of plagues could unfold, maximally displaying God's power and glory to Egypt, Israel, and future generations.

The hardening was not about preventing Pharaoh from repenting and humbling himself before God. In fact, God called him out for continuing to exalt himself against God's people (Exodus 9:17), indicating that Pharaoh should have and could have humbled himself. Furthermore, when Pharaoh finally did capitulate after the tenth plague, he did not submit himself to the Hebrew God but only released the people. Thus, his hardening was specifically about renewing his resolve to keep the people.

God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart did not override his will or force unwanted obedience. On the contrary, it strengthened him to persist in his own desire—refusing to let Israel go—despite the plagues' intense pressure to surrender. Thus, God empowered Pharaoh's chosen defiance rather than suppressing it.

God Reserves the Right

So God accomplished His purpose of demonstrating His power to the world, not by overriding Pharaoh's will, but by strengthening him in it. In essence, God took a rebellious Pharaoh and chose to demonstrate great amounts of wrath upon him. He could have instead simply delivered the children of Israel from Egypt and left the rebellious Pharaoh to his fate. But He chose that Pharaoh would be an example of His power and judgment on rebellious people.

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. Romans 9:18

With Israel, who was no less stiff-necked and rebellious than Pharaoh, God chose to demonstrate mercy. He could have destroyed them at the base of Mt Sinai. But He chose that Israel would be an example of His mercy towards rebellious people who turn to Him, while Pharaoh was a demonstration of His wrath towards rebelliousness.

Finding Fault

At this point, some people might conceivably ask: If God wanted Pharaoh to be stubborn, then how can God judge Pharaoh for being stubborn?

After all, it was God's will that the king of Egypt remain stubborn. And of course, Pharaoh did exactly that—acted according to God's sovereign will. So they ask: How is it true justice for God to judge Pharaoh for being stubborn, since Pharaoh had no choice but to do God's will?

Anticipating this question, Paul addressed the issue in verse 19.

¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" ²⁰ 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?" ²¹ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Romans 9:19-21

We naturally assume that in verses 20 and 21, Paul directly answers the question posed in verse 19. A closer look, however, reveals that these verses do not offer a direct response—whether read from a Calvinist, Arminian, or any intermediate

perspective. Assuming they do can derail our understanding of Paul's actual argument and obscure the true flow of his thought.

Angry Potter

The question raised in verse 19 is essentially this: "How can God judge people, such as Pharaoh, since they are merely doing His will?" Verse 20 answers with a counter-question: "What right do mere humans have to question the ways of their Creator God?"

Though the counter-question may not seem fully satisfying, it makes a legitimate point: God, as Creator, has complete authority over His creation. We see similar authority in human creators—a director may construct a set just to blow it up—without anyone calling it unjust. We therefore have no grounds to question God's sovereign decisions regarding His creation.

But then verse 21 introduces the potter metaphor, presumably intended to illustrate and support the counter-question in verse 20. The metaphor's meaning is straightforward: just as a potter may take from the same clay to make one portion into beautiful pottery destined for admiration and another into pottery for contempt, so God may do with His creatures—whom He made, ironically, from clay.

The trouble with the potter metaphor is that it does not align with the argument we have traced thus far. The objection in verse 19 focused on how God can justly find fault with those who simply carry out His will, while the metaphor addressed a different matter entirely: the Creator's authority over His creation, without addressing blame at all.

In the metaphor, the potter shaped two vessels from the same clay—say, one a fine vase and other a humble chamber

pot (used before modern plumbing). We would not expect the potter to grow angry with the chamber pot or criticize it for failing to be a beautiful vase.

Suppose the potter did grow angry and condemn the chamber pot. We would rightly ask: Why is he finding fault, since the chamber pot has done nothing to resist his will?

The metaphor, far from resolving the issue, actually mirrors the very objection raised in verse 19. It offers no explanation for why God would judge someone like Pharaoh, just as it would be absurd for the potter to condemn the lesser vessel. Approaching verses 20–21 as a direct answer to verse 19 ultimately leaves us with the same unresolved question: How can God judge a person for being exactly what He made them to be?

Wrong Premise

Clearly, verses 20–21 do not directly answer the objection posed in verse 19. This implies that they were never intended to serve as a direct response, for the Holy Spirit would not raise a profound question only to leave it unresolved. It must be that He wasn't providing a direct answer to the question.

This is because the question in verse 19, which people sometimes ask, is built on a false premise. Such questions cannot be answered directly; instead, the flawed assumption must be addressed first.

Let's break down verse 19 to identify the unspoken premise.

"Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" Romans 9:19

The first part asked why God would find fault with Pharaoh for being stubborn. By itself, this is easy to answer. We all know it is wrong to be stubborn against the God who made you. God had every right to find fault with Pharaoh for being stubborn because Pharaoh was in the wrong.

Then the second part asked: *"Who has resisted God's will?"* This is also easy to answer in isolation. No one can resist God's will because He is all-powerful and always accomplishes His purposes.

The real issue emerges when the two parts of the objection are combined. Together, they amount to this: "If God willed Pharaoh to be stubborn, how can Pharaoh be held at fault?" The unspoken premise is that God took an originally compliant Pharaoh and actively made him stubborn to fulfill His purposes. In short, it assumes Pharaoh became stubborn only because God forced stubbornness upon him. This premise, however, is false: God did not implant stubbornness in Pharaoh.

James declared that God neither tempts nor entices anyone to sin (James 1:13). If He does not entice people toward evil, He certainly does not compel them to it. The premise is false: God never forces anyone to become stubborn or rebellious against Him.

True Premise

It is true that God desired a stubborn Pharaoh, as stated in verse 17. Yet He did not create one by reshaping the existing Pharaoh's personality from compliant to stubborn. Rather, He selected an already stubborn and rebellious individual, intervened in his life, and raised him to the throne—thus obtaining the defiant Pharaoh He desired.

The premise that God implanted stubbornness in Pharaoh's heart is entirely mistaken. In reality, God raised up a man who already possessed a stubborn heart to become Pharaoh.

Thus, the combined objection in verse 19 cannot be answered directly because it rests on this false assumption—that God made Pharaoh stubborn. The erroneous premise must first be dismantled. Accordingly, verses 20–21 do not engage the objection head-on; instead, they bypass the flawed question to confront and refute the underlying

What About You?

They accomplished this by posing a counter-question that shifts our focus from Pharaoh's case to our own. It confronts us directly: “What about you, O man? Will you answer back to God?” Instead of debating whether God is just in judging Pharaoh, we are forced to consider a more personal question: Is God right to judge you for your own stubborn rebellion?

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?

Romans 9:20

The counter-question rightly presumes that we are all stubborn toward God, since every one of us has resisted His commands at some point. Yet it forces us to confront the origin of that stubbornness: Did God implant rebellion in our hearts, or does it arise as we choose to defy His commands?

It makes no sense to claim that my stubbornness aligns with God's will. By definition, stubbornness toward God is resistance to His will. To suggest that such rebellion is actually obedience to His divine plan is contradictory. The truth is clear: God is not responsible for my stubbornness. I rebel because I

choose not to follow His commands, which means He is fully just in judging me for that willful defiance.

Paul's counter-question in verse 20 brilliantly silences critics who accuse God of injustice in judging Pharaoh. It turns the tables by forcing them to confront their own rebellion: If you challenge God's right to judge Pharaoh, do you also dare to challenge His right to judge you? This approach is powerfully effective—it is one thing to question God's fairness toward Pharaoh from a safe distance; it is quite another to examine ourselves and ask whether God is righteous in holding us accountable for our own stubbornness.

Personalizing the issue this way shows that we cannot honestly criticize God for judging human rebellion. Our own stubbornness stems from our desire to follow our will rather than God's—not from any divine imposition. In our personal case, we have no legitimate grounds to answer back to God.

Ultimately, if our stubbornness is our own choice and not God's doing, Pharaoh's was too. Personalizing the issue silences the objection: God's judgment is just—for Pharaoh, and for us.

Forming

Having dismantled the false premise, Paul introduces a correct question grounded in truth. The real issue is not God transforming a compliant man into a stubborn one, but sovereignly shaping an already stubborn individual for a specific role. God did not alter Pharaoh's character; He formed him.

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?" Romans 9:20

To form something is to take existing material and mold it into a new shape—without altering its fundamental substance. Paul's point is precisely this: God did not transform Pharaoh into a different person by changing his character. Instead, He took Pharaoh as he was—stubborn and rebellious—and shaped his role and circumstances to serve as a powerful demonstration of divine authority.

Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Romans 9:21

Paul illustrates his point by comparing God's work with Pharaoh to a potter shaping clay—a fitting analogy. Clay is a stiff and stubborn kind of soil, and worthless in its raw state for cultivation. A skilled potter, however, can transform a lump of this unyielding material into valuable vessels. Though he radically alters its shape, he does not change its essential substance: the clay remains clay. In the same way, God formed Pharaoh—taking him in his existing character and molding his role to a valuable purpose.

In Paul's metaphor, the potter draws from the same lump of clay to fashion different vessels—some for honorable purposes, such as an elegant vase to hold fragrant flowers, and others for common or dishonorable use, like a chamber pot for waste. The clay remains identical in substance; only its form and function differ according to the potter's design.

The metaphor's central point is clear: the potter has absolute right to shape the clay according to his will. The clay has no basis for complaint about its form. A chamber pot cannot justly accuse the potter of unfairness for not fashioning it into a

vase, since the potter is fully entitled to transform the otherwise worthless, stubborn clay into whatever vessel he chooses.

Metaphorically Speaking

In the metaphor, the potter represents God, while the lump of clay symbolizes the population of Egypt—both Hebrews and Egyptians alike, all stubborn and rebellious in their own ways. From this single lump, God fashioned vessels for different purposes: the children of Israel as vessels of honor, chosen for mercy and deliverance, and Pharaoh as a vessel of wrath, fitted to display divine power.

The metaphor's key point is that Pharaoh—the object formed—has no grounds to challenge God for shaping him into a vessel of dishonor rather than one of honor. This is because God, as Creator, is fully righteous in assigning roles to stubborn and rebellious people according to His purpose.

This is the heart of the matter: God did not will Pharaoh to become stubborn and then judge him for it—any more than He wills stubbornness in us. Rather, from among a stubbornly rebellious people, God sovereignly shaped Pharaoh's life for one role—to display His wrath and power—while forming the nation of Israel for another: to reveal His mercy and glory.

In his discussion of Pharaoh, Paul is building his argument that God is not unrighteous in choosing Israel as His special people over the other nations, despite Israel being no different in character from them. God is fully righteous both in showing mercy to whom He wills and in hardening whom He wills.

Textual Issues

God indeed had a deliberate purpose in forming both vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath—His choices were far from arbitrary. Yet as Paul begins to unveil that purpose in the verses that follow, his argument appears to veer abruptly off course.

Up to this point, Paul has written with clarity and coherence, carefully demonstrating God's righteousness in elevating Israel above other nations and extending mercy to a stubbornly rebellious people. Yet in these verses, he introduces a grammatically jarring element: he begins a conditional “if” clause—detailing God's patience and purpose—but omits the corresponding “then” clause, creating a disturbingly incomplete structure that has troubled preachers and scholars for centuries.

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? Romans 9:22-24

The “if” clause begins in verse 22: “What if God, wanting to show His wrath, etc...?” Normally, such a conditional construction would conclude with an explicit “then” clause—something like, “...then God would be perfectly just” or “...then who could accuse Him of wrongdoing?” Yet Paul deliberately omits the expected “then,” leaving the sentence strikingly incomplete and creating what appears to be a serious grammatical flaw.

Some people argue that this was not truly a grammatical error. In my view, however, Paul *deliberately* omitted the expected “then” clause to create dramatic tension, setting the stage for his astonishing conclusion. Through this intentional disruption of grammar, he was executing a brilliant literary sleight of hand—he diverted the reader's expectations and delivered a far more profound and unexpected resolution.

Brilliant Butchery

Through his “if” clause, Paul invites readers to envision a scenario in which God, desiring to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, patiently endured vessels already prepared for destruction. From the preceding context, readers would recognize this as a reference to Pharaoh—a man whose persistent rebellion marked him for judgment long before he ascended the throne. To fully display His wrath, God deliberately withholds immediate judgment on such vessels for a time.

Rather than concluding the “if” clause there, Paul extends it to include vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory. Readers would naturally infer that if Pharaoh represents the vessel of wrath, then Israel must be the vessel of mercy (notice my little “if/then” clause).

What if God,
 wanting to demonstrate His wrath and power,
 refrained from judging vessels prepared for
 judgment,
and wanting to make known the riches of His glory
 poured out His mercy upon vessels prepared for
 glory...

The interpretation is straightforward: Pharaoh and the Egyptians stood condemned for rejecting the true God (John 3:18). Rather than executing immediate judgment, God patiently endured their rebellion to fully demonstrate His wrath and power.

In contrast, the Israelites, though equally deserving judgment, were fashioned as vessels of mercy, enriched by the riches of God's glory. As His chosen people, He repeatedly extended mercy they did not earn.

Boom

Rather than resolving the extended “if” clause with a “then,” Paul disrupts the reader's expectations entirely, delivering a bombshell revelation about the vessels of mercy—one that radically reorients the entire discussion. The vessels prepared beforehand for glory are not the Israelites, as we might have expected. Consequently, the vessels of wrath are not the Egyptians or Pharaoh.

“...which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called,...”

The phrase “even us whom He also called” comes as a complete shock in the flow of thought. Up to this point, Paul's argument has revolved around two parties: Israel and Pharaoh (representing the Egyptians). Suddenly, he introduces a third: believers in Christ. These believers—not ethnic Israel as a whole—are the true vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory. With this revelation, Paul abruptly switches the entire train of thought to a whole new track.

This sudden shift compels us to rethink the vessels metaphor entirely. If believers in Christ are the vessels of mercy,

then who are the vessels of wrath? Pharaoh no longer fits, as his role was tied to the historical contrast with Israel—they received mercy amid rebellion, while he bore wrath.

What group, then, stands in contrast to these believers? We must trace Paul's argument back to the beginning of chapter 9: it is unbelieving Israel. They stand outside the blessings in Christ that believers enjoy. Thus, in the metaphor, the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction represent not Pharaoh, but unbelieving Israel.

Israel: Vessels of...

Paul's sudden reversal is a masterful literary sleight of hand. It is astonishing to see Israel—the covenant people of God—likened to vessels of wrath. Yet the truth of this illustration strikes us immediately as undeniable.

“What if God, wanting to make His power and wrath known, endured with much longsuffering over the course of several hundred years, the stubborn shenanigans of the stiff-necked Israelites, so that He could make known the abundant riches of His glorious grace on the vessels of mercy, His people in Christ?”

It is true that, in Pharaoh's day, the Israelites were vessels of mercy. God absolutely showed compassion to this stiff-necked people, delivering them from bondage and leading them toward a land flowing with milk and honey.

Yet Israel fits the description of vessels of wrath perfectly. Throughout their history—in the wilderness and the promised land—God patiently endured their frequent rebellion and wickedness with much longsuffering, repeatedly withholding the total destruction they deserved.

God shaped unbelieving Israel as vessels of wrath so that the vessels of mercy—the church—might know the riches of His glory poured out upon us, despite our own stubborn sinfulness. We recognize that we are no better than those rebellious Israelites. Yet, instead of the wrath we deserve, God has lavished unbelievably rich mercy upon us.

Righteous God

Paul has demonstrated that God is not unrighteous in choosing Israel as His people. He extended exceptional mercy to them, yet it remains His right to bestow mercy or wrath as He wills upon rebellious people. They have no grounds to complain about how He shapes them—whether as vessels for displaying mercy or for revealing wrath.

Israel cannot—and indeed does not—complain against God for forming them into His covenant people, even though they often functioned as vessels of wrath.

God's ultimate purpose in choosing the Israelites was to bring salvation to a rebellious world. Who could possibly complain about that?

Romans 9: Israel's Unbelief

Paul's startling claim—that Israel themselves functioned as vessels of wrath—was so astonishing that he immediately cited Old Testament prophets to demonstrate that this conclusion was thoroughly biblical, not a product of his own imagination.

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." Romans 9:25-

29

Paul first references Hosea, who prophesied a time when Israel would no longer be called "My people." This foretold the exile of the ten northern tribes to Assyria and the two southern tribes to Babylon—a period when God poured out His wrath like water (Hos. 5:10). The judgment was so severe that Israel

temporarily lost its identity as God's people: the temple and priesthood were destroyed, severing all visible connection to Him.

The portion Paul quotes from Hosea, however, looks beyond judgment to restoration: God would again call them "My people." This was fulfilled when the exiles returned and rebuilt the temple. By citing Hosea, Paul demonstrates that Israel had indeed served as vessels of wrath for a season—experiencing divine judgment before mercy.

Paul then turns to Isaiah, who foretold wrath on Israel comparable to that on Sodom and Gomorrah, reducing the nation to a mere remnant. Isaiah's prophecy has both near and far fulfillments: the near term in the Babylonian captivity, and the far term in the generation leading up to Christ's reign on David's throne. Both periods were marked by drastic population reduction through divine wrath.

These prophecies confirm Paul's claim that Israel had been shaped into vessels of wrath. Though God chose them as His people and showered them with extraordinary grace and mercy, they remained stiff-necked and rebellious, fully deserving judgment. Yet He patiently endured their rebellion with much longsuffering, forming them into vessels that displayed His wrath—just as He had done with Pharaoh.

Thus, God accomplished a dual purpose in Israel that appears paradoxical. On one hand, He shaped them into vessels of honor, elevating them above all nations and bestowing the blessings listed at the beginning of chapter 9. Yet simultaneously, He revealed in them the full intensity of His wrath against sin.

We who have read Israel's history and learned of God's wrath against their transgressions rejoice that we live not under law but under grace. By displaying on Israel the same wrath we deserved, God has made the riches of His mercy toward us all the more evident.

Can Israel complain that God made her a vessel of wrath? No—she rebelled and fully deserved that wrath, and more: total annihilation. Yet God preserved her and extended mercy. Israel has no grounds for complaint; indeed, she boasts in being the people of God.

Though God displayed His wrath on Israel, He was neither cruel nor unjust; they had rebelled. Yet He used their rebellion to highlight, by stark contrast, the surpassing richness of His mercy toward sinners.

They did not believe

This brings us full circle to the original question: Why is Israel—the people of God—now on the outside of Christ's blessings, while Gentiles, once far off, have been brought near?

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. Romans 9:30-32

Paul finally discloses the root reason most of Israel rejected the Lord Jesus. Though they zealously pursued righteousness, they failed to attain it. True righteousness cannot be earned

through human effort but is God's gift to those who believe. The Israelites refused to humble themselves, admit their spiritual poverty, and receive God's mercy and imputed righteousness.

Thus Israel rejected her Messiah, just as she had rejected the prophets before Him. The irony is profound: throughout much of her history, Israel spurned God's call to repentance in pursuit of wickedness. In Paul's day, she spurned it in pursuit of self-righteousness.

Gentiles, who never pursued righteousness, received it through faith in Christ. Yet Israel, the people of God, did not. Why?

Not because God didn't elect them to salvation, but—as Paul clearly explains—because they did not pursue righteousness through the avenue of faith. They pursued righteousness by works of the law. Refusing to accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah and Savior, they stumbled from God's favor.

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."*

Romans 9:33

God sent Jesus through the nation of Israel to be the Saviour of the world. He has given assurance to all that whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed. The Lord Jesus can and will save all who call upon Him.

Summary of Romans 9

Though the Israelites were indeed the people of God, they were not, as a whole, children of God. They were children of the

flesh, relying on natural descent rather than resting in God's promises. God chose them not for their merits, but according to His purpose—to exalt the younger over the older.

Though God's choice of Israel may at first seem arbitrary or unjust, He has every right to extend extravagant mercy as He wills. This was Israel's story: a stiff-necked and rebellious people, yet God repeatedly showed them mercy rather than the judgment they deserved. There is no injustice when God withholds deserved wrath from sinners.

Nor is there injustice when God chooses to display wrath on rebels. He alone determines whether to extend mercy or judgment on rebels. No rebel has grounds to complain if God uses them to demonstrate His wrath rather than His mercy.

The Israelites became the people of God not because they were more godly than other nations, but because God had a purpose for them. He intended to display the riches of His mercy toward rebels. Israel was as rebellious as any nation, yet God blessed them and remained faithful to His covenant despite their unfaithfulness. If He showed such kindness to a stiff-necked people, how much more will He lavish goodness on those who humble themselves and repent?

At the same time, God revealed His wrath against sin through Israel. Under the Mosaic covenant, obedience brought blessing and disobedience judgment. While Romans 1 describes God abandoning other nations to their depravity, He did not abandon Israel to unrestrained wickedness. Instead, He disciplined them to curb their sin, displaying His wrath against rebellion so that others might see, fear, and repent.

God preserved Israel not because they were godly, but because He desired to save sinners from condemnation.

Through Israel He revealed humanity's desperate need for mercy, His abundant willingness to extend it, and His ultimate provision of it in the Lord Jesus.

Romans 10: Why is Israel Unsaved?

The nation of Israel seemed ideally suited for salvation in Christ Jesus. As God's chosen people, we could reasonably expect that God would give them priority in sending the gospel. They were already familiar with core concepts—righteousness, sin, substitutionary sacrifice, and atonement—making the gospel's logic readily accessible. Yet most remained unsaved.

Several explanations might account for Israel's failure to embrace salvation: Perhaps God sovereignly hindered their reception of the gospel. Or the message was presented in a way that obscured its meaning. Or the messengers lacked credibility. Or the gospel seemed less appealing than the Law. Or Israel had grown indifferent to spiritual matters. Or the apostles had abandoned efforts to reach them.

After all, it seems improbable that they were so blind as to miss the salvation right in front of their eyes. Nor is it likely that a people zealous for God's commands would knowingly reject His gracious offer. In Romans 10, Paul reveals the true obstacle keeping them from receiving God's gift.

Indifference?

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. Romans 10:1

Paul's heartfelt prayer reveals that neither he nor the apostles withheld the gospel from Israel or lacked care for their salvation. His deepest desire was for their salvation, and he prayed accordingly—confident that such a request aligned with

God's will. Indifference from the apostles was not the obstacle to Israel's salvation.

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Romans 10:2-3

Nor was Israel indifferent to the things of God; they were intensely zealous for their God-given religion. Yet they failed to grasp the reality of the righteousness that comes from God. In their zeal, they sought to establish their own righteousness rather than calling on Him for the righteousness He provided.

The Message?

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." Romans 10:4-5

Had Israel turned to Christ, they would have discovered no need to accumulate righteousness by keeping the Law. Salvation in Christ provides righteousness as a gift, freeing them from relying on law-keeping to remain in God's presence.

The Israelites knew the Law condemned to death anyone who failed to keep its commands. To dwell in God's presence and approach His temple, they understood flawless obedience was required. In Christ, however, they could have lived secure even when falling short, covered by His righteousness.

Life in Christ offers a profound advantage over life under the Law: believers continue to live even when they fall short of

keeping God's commands, while the Law condemns any failure with death. The gospel's message of grace is far superior to the Law's demand for perfection. Thus, the message itself cannot be what deterred Israel from salvation.

Message Accessibility?

In the following verses, Paul skillfully interweaves Moses' words with his own to demonstrate that the message of righteousness by faith was just as accessible to the Israelites as the word of the Law.

But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach) Romans 10:6-8

Paul was quoting from Moses' address to the children of Israel shortly before his death. In that farewell message, Moses reminded the people of all that God had done for them.

"For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Regarding the Law, Moses emphasized that the Israelites need not ascend to heaven to receive God's commands—Moses had climbed the mountain on their behalf and brought the word down. Nor did they need to cross the sea; Moses had already led them through the Red Sea. In fact, he had brought them directly to Mount Sinai, where God's commands were delivered to them.

In the same way, the Israelites need not ascend to heaven for the gospel—Christ Himself descended to bring it. Nor did they need to descend into the abyss of the grave—Christ had already risen from the dead. Furthermore, He sent His apostles to proclaim this word of faith directly to them. God had placed the message within their reach.

...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. Romans 10:9-10

The word of the gospel was profoundly simple—so straightforward that Paul summarized it in a few lines. It was no lofty or inaccessible doctrine beyond the Jews' grasp. The plain truth was this: Jesus is Lord, proven by His resurrection from the dead. All they needed to do was believe God's word regarding Him.

*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."
Romans 10:12-13*

In this way, God made the gospel message as accessible as the Law itself—yet profoundly different. The gospel declares that righteousness comes by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, while the Law demands it through perfect obedience to the commandments.

As a side note, Paul's gospel presentation here stands apart from others in the New Testament: it does not emphasize sin. This makes sense in context, for it is directed towards Jews zealous for the Law. Unlike Gentiles, they did not need conviction of sin or warnings of judgment—they already acknowledged those truths. Their stumbling block was the lordship of Jesus: they needed to recognize that the man from Nazareth was none other than the Son of God from heaven.

Thus Paul demonstrates that God made the gospel truth fully accessible to the Israelites. He neither hid it to bar their salvation, nor made it incomprehensible, nor restricted their opportunity to call on Jesus. From all appearances, they had the exact same open door to salvation as the Gentiles—all that was required was to call on the name of the Lord.

So why didn't they call on Him?

Saving Israel

Sinners do not naturally call out to God. Guilty people normally avoid Him rather than seek His attention. Even Adam and Eve, who once walked daily with God, hid from His presence after their disobedience (Genesis 3:8–10). Sinful humanity, left to itself, will never cry out to a holy God. For reconciliation to occur, God Himself must take the initiative.

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they

*have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?
And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Romans
10:14-15*

The apostle Paul outlines the sequence for salvation, beginning with the end result—calling on the Lord—and working backward to the initial step:

- God saves those who call upon Him.
- Calling requires believing.
- Believing follows hearing the gospel.
- Hearing comes through a preacher's proclamation.
- Preachers are sent by God.

The process begins with God's initiative: He sends a messenger to proclaim the gospel. Once the truth is delivered, the listener bears responsibility to receive and believe it. Only after believing will the hearer call on the Lord's name and be saved.

This sequence is simple yet rigorously logical—the essential steps for anyone to call on the Lord's name. If any one link fails, salvation does not follow. In Israel's case, we ask where the chain failed, preventing them from calling on their God?

The Point of Failure

The first step rested with God: sending credible messengers bearing His word to Israel. The Jews, zealous for the Law, would not heed just anyone or accept a message from an unauthorized source. Accordingly, God sent Jewish messengers equipped with supernatural signs to confirm their divine commission.

As it is written:

*"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things!" Romans 10:15*

Paul quotes Isaiah, who proclaimed beautiful news of peace to Israel (Isa. 52:7). Yet despite the prophet's faithful delivery of this good message, Israel's response fell far short.

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "LORD, who has believed our report?" So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:16-17

Isaiah declared that Israel had not turned to God because they did not believe his report (Isa. 53:1). Paul seizes on this to highlight a simple truth: the faith that leads to calling on the Lord does not arise spontaneously. Without hearing God's promise, no one instinctively believes He will respond to their call for mercy. Such faith comes only when someone proclaims the word of God that assures them He will respond.

Thus, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. So why did the Jews lack this faith?

*But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed:
"Their sound has gone out to all the earth,
And their words to the ends of the world." Romans 10:18*

The apostle Paul states unequivocally that Israel had heard the gospel. God did not withhold the message from them; He sent His word to Israel just as He had sent it throughout the earth.

Yet perhaps they failed to recognize that the gospel proclaimed to the Gentiles was meant for them as well.

*But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says:
"I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation,
I will move you to anger by a foolish nation." Romans 10:19*

Paul quotes the Song of Moses (Deut. 32), which God commissioned precisely to testify against Israel's future rebellion (Deut. 31:19–21). The song foretold that Israel would reject the Rock of their salvation, provoking God's jealousy by turning from Him to false gods (Deut. 32:15–16). In response, God would provoke them to jealousy (Deut. 32:21) through extending His blessing to the Gentiles. God gave them the song to ensure they were not ignorant of what He would do.

Though Israel may have forgotten this ancient song, God now reminds them: He would turn to the Gentiles, who would call upon Him when the Jews did not. The Gentiles heard the same message from the same messengers, and though it was even more astonishing to them than to the Jews, they responded.

*But Isaiah is very bold and says:
"I was found by those who did not seek Me;
I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me."
Romans 10:20*

Throughout this chapter, Paul drives home a central point: God had done everything necessary for the Jews to hear the gospel, believe, call upon Jesus, and be saved. Israel's failure to obtain salvation was not because it wasn't God's purpose to save them. Rather, they failed because they rejected His word.

*But to Israel he says:
"All day long I have stretched out My hands
To a disobedient and contrary people." Romans 10:21*

God employs the imagery of outstretched hands—a heartfelt appeal—to reveal His deep longing for His people, Israel. This picture shows God earnestly inviting them to return, even as they persistently reject Him.

Israel rejected the gospel through willful disobedience and obstinacy. The salvation sequence broke down at the point of belief—they heard but refused to believe in God's word. Their exclusion was not due to any failure on God's part, but solely to their refusal to submit to Him.

Concluding Thoughts

The chapter ends echoing its opening sentiment: a profound longing for Israel's salvation. Verse 1 expresses Paul's heart; the final verse reveals God's own yearning for His people to turn to Him.

Paul's central argument in Romans 10 is that Israel bears full responsibility for missing salvation. He carefully demonstrates that God provided everything necessary—and earnestly desired their salvation. Ultimately, Israel remained unsaved because they rejected His word.

Good News

The chapter's crowning truth is that Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). Believers need not keep the Law to become righteous enough to enter God's presence—they are drawn near through Christ's righteousness.

We easily fall into thinking we must first become personally righteous to be near God. Yet the truth is this: even amid ongoing struggles with sin—long before victory—we may draw near to God because of the righteousness of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a crucial truth we often overlook. We assume the path to God's presence lies in purifying our lives from evil thoughts and deeds—but this is the approach of the Law. Under faith, self-purification is not the key. As sinners, we come near God in Christ. We must be honest about our sins and rest in the Savior who justifies us. Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness; trusting Him is the true key to drawing near to God.

Romans 11: Blinded

How long would God extend His arms in appeal to a people who continually reject Him? What would finally prompt Him to say, “Enough”? Would even the crucifixion of His Son cause Him to turn away?

When God sent His Spirit, He sent Him to indwell believers in Jesus, not the nation of Israel as a whole. In this way, He brought the believers closer to Himself than the Israelites had ever been. In the Old Testament, His presence dwelt in the temple amid the nation; after Christ's resurrection, He dwells within each individual believer through the Spirit. God thus ushered believers into intimate relationship while leaving unbelieving Israel on the outside.

I say then, has God cast away His people? Romans 11:1a

Obviously, God had not cast off every Jew—thousands had received Jesus as Lord and were indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But what about those who rejected the gospel? Had God disowned them?

Not Cut Off

Paul's very phrasing of the question hints at the answer. Abraham's descendants are God's people under an everlasting covenant, in which He pledged to be their God forever (Gen. 17:7), regardless of future circumstances. As long as they maintain the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:9–10), God cannot cast them off without violating His covenant. By framing the question as he does, Paul presupposes their status as His

people—a reality that makes it unreasonable to claim that He has abandoned them.

Outreach

God continues to work among the Jews who rejected Jesus—He has not turned His back on them. Only His faithful working in their hearts enables any to call upon the Lord Jesus.

I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. Romans 11:1

Saul of Tarsus was not seeking God when Jesus confronted him. Far from it—he was actively opposing God, traveling to Damascus to persecute believers who had fled his wrath. He would never have repented on his own. Only God's direct intervention and outreach brought him to call on the name of the Lord.

This explains Paul's confidence that God had not abandoned unbelieving Israel. As a former rejector of God himself, Paul knew: if God cast off rebellious Jews, He would surely have cast off Saul. Yet God had extended His arms to Saul and saved him. Paul stood as living proof that God still reached out to unbelieving, rebellious Israel.

Indeed, without God's initiative, no Jew who rejected Jesus would ever have been saved. They viewed calling on His name as blasphemy and would never turn to Him on their own. Saul's dramatic salvation demonstrated that God continued to proactively extend salvation to those who rejected His Son—proof that He had not cast them off.

Foreknowledge

Furthermore, God was not naive when He made His covenant with Abraham's descendants. He knew exactly what lay ahead when He chose the Israelites as His people.

*God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.
Romans 11:2a*

God knew from the outset everything Israel would do, even foretelling it to Moses (Deut. 31–32). It simply isn't reasonable to imagine that He would establish an everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:7) while foreseeing its failure. His foreknowledge ensures the covenant's permanence.

Days of Elijah

Yet the majority of the nation had rejected Jesus and stood outside Christ's blessings. This did not mean God had abandoned them. He faced a similar crisis in Elijah's day, when most of Israel rejected Him for Baal. If He did not cast off the nation then, why would we assume He has now?

Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? Romans 11:2-3

Elijah, the great prophet sent to call Israel to repentance, had despaired of the nation. He complained to God that further effort was futile: they had killed His prophets, torn down His altars, and now sought Elijah's own life.

Elijah believed he was God's only remaining prophet. By fleeing Israel, he was removing the last known testimony of

God's word from the nation. With no one left to proclaim it, repentance was impossible, and the people doomed. Elijah was effectively abandoning Israel to their fate.

But God did not share Elijah's despair.

But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Romans 11:4-5

Despite Israel's blatant rejection, God assured Elijah that He had no intention of abandoning the nation for the sake of a remnant who remained faithful to Him. Though only a small percentage—seven thousand—it was sufficient for God to continue extending grace. After all, if He would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah for just ten righteous people, He would certainly not cut off His own covenant people for the sake of seven thousand.

Paul was fully confident that God would act consistently in his day as in Elijah's. In both eras, the majority rejected God despite irrefutable signs: fire from heaven in Elijah's time, and the resurrection of Jesus in Paul's.

Furthermore, both eras featured a remnant. Elijah's consisted of those who had not bowed to Baal. Paul's was defined by grace—those who submitted to God's righteousness rather than pursuing their own through works of the Law (Rom. 10:3).

God is unchanging. His response in Paul's day would mirror His response in Elijah's. Since He did not abandon the nation then, neither has He abandoned it now.

Election of Grace

The phrase “election of grace” refers back to God's election of Jacob in Romans 9. By choosing Jacob and his descendants, God designated them as His people. The same principle applied to the remnant in Paul's day: God chose believers in Christ to be His people. He drew them near, associated with them, and bestowed His favor upon them above all others—just as He had with Jacob's descendants. He elected the believers to be His people.

In both cases, God's election was not based on works. This is clearly evident with Jacob, chosen while still in the womb (Rom. 9:11). It holds equally for Paul's remnant: they became God's people not through good works, but solely by His grace—hence the term “election of grace.”

A key difference lies in the realm of election. God chose Jacob's descendants as His people in the physical realm: they could draw physically near—entering the temple, offering sacrifices, and participating in feasts—even when spiritually distant (as with many Pharisees and Sadducees). Gentiles, though perhaps spiritually near, lacked such access. Israel was God's people on earth.

In contrast, God chose the remnant in Christ as His people in the spiritual realm. By the Spirit, they could approach His heavenly throne (Heb. 4:16), even if physically distant from His temple in Jerusalem. Thus, believers draw far nearer to God spiritually than Jacob's descendants ever could physically.

God's election of Jacob's descendants foreshadowed the believing remnant. What Israel was to Him in the physical realm, believers are in the spiritual. In both cases, election designates a distinct group as His people. As Jacob's election was not based

on works, neither was the believing remnant's election. Both are based on God's grace.

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. Romans 11:6

Since God chose the remnant as His people on the basis of grace, those who approached Him through works were excluded. He received only those who came on the basis of His grace in the Lord Jesus. These are the ones He elected as His people in Christ. This was an election of grace, not works.

Blinded

The physical people of God—descendants of Jacob—pursued His blessings through works of the Law. Consequently, they neither entered the blessings of the remnant in Christ nor attained the righteousness that is in Him.

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Romans 11:7

Israel—Jacob's descendants—pursued righteousness (Rom. 9:31; 10:3) but failed to attain it, seeking it through works of the Law. The remnant, however, obtained righteousness not by physical acts, but by faith in Jesus.

In the Old Testament era, Israel approached God at the Jerusalem temple. When Jesus died, God tore the temple veil (Matt. 27:51), signifying that His presence had departed the physical sanctuary. From that moment, the only way to draw near to God was through Jesus. Because Israel—God's people

in the physical realm—rejected Jesus, they did not transition to becoming His people in the spiritual realm.

Israel's exclusion from life in Christ has led many to conclude that God has cut them off entirely. But God has not abandoned His people. They are indeed distant from Him—not because He rejected them, but because He has blinded them.

The Blind Metaphor

The blindness God imposed on Israel was not physical, but spiritual. To grasp this metaphor, however, we must first understand physical blindness.

Physically blind people cannot see objects directly in front of them and are thus at risk of stumbling over obstacles that are plainly visible to others.

Spiritual sight involves understanding abstract truths and concepts. Thus, a spiritually blind person fails to comprehend what others readily grasp, leaving them vulnerable to downfall over truths that are evident to the seeing.

God had inflicted spiritual blindness on Israel, yet this did not mean He had cut them off. This becomes evident when we consider other periods of Israel's spiritual blindness—whether divinely imposed or self-inflicted.

Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, To this very day." Romans 11:8

The opening line—"God has given them a spirit of stupor"—is quoted from Isaiah 29:10, with the remainder drawn from Deuteronomy 29:4.

Blinded for Good

Isaiah 29 prophesies God's judgment on Jerusalem for the people's ungodliness, sending armies to destroy it. Previously, when judged, the Israelites often feigned godliness while remaining unrepentant at heart (Isa. 29:13). Their repentance was typically shallow and short-lived.

In Isaiah 29, God declares He will blind them to the impending judgment. Though they would see the approaching armies, they would not recognize them as divine judgment. This blindness prevented shallow repentance, allowing their obstinacy to persist until they were carried into Babylonian captivity—where they would remain until genuine repentance occurred.

God imposed this blindness to lead them through the difficult but necessary experience of captivity. Though their blindness was temporary, it achieved its purpose: after their return from exile, Israel never again fell into idolatry. Thus, God blinded the nation not to abandon them, but for their salvation—for their good.

Blinded to the Obvious

In Deuteronomy 29, Moses told Israel that God had not given them eyes to see His care during the wilderness journey: their clothes and sandals miraculously endured for forty years, and manna appeared daily around their tents (Deut. 29:5–6). Yet they failed to perceive the significance of this provision, remaining blind to the obvious reality of God's active care.

Yet this blindness did not mean God had rejected them. Shortly after Moses' words, God led the nation into the promised land, granting victory over their enemies despite their

spiritual dullness. Their blindness simply meant they lacked insight to recognize the evident reality of His care—not that God had cast them off.

Father, Blind Them

In Moses' time, Israel's blindness meant they failed to perceive God's care. In Isaiah's day, it meant they were oblivious to coming judgment, leading to temporary downfall. But spiritual blindness was not limited to the Old Testament. In Paul's day, it was invoked by Israel's Messiah Himself, as foretold in a messianic psalm of David (Ps. 69:21–23) which Paul now quotes.

And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always." Romans 11:9-10

In Psalm 69:25, the Messiah prays for Israel's blindness so that they would stumble, leading to their dwelling places becoming desolate. Israel's homes were stationed by God around the temple; empty homes would signify removal from God's presence. The Messiah's intent was that the Israelites would be removed from God, disassociated from Him, and no longer counted among His people.

God granted the Messiah's request, imposing spiritual blindness on Israel that caused them to stumble and fall.

The Obvious Unseen

Physical blindness means seeing nothing at all. Spiritual blindness, however, is more selective: the person remains capable of understanding many things but fails to grasp a

specific truth. For Israel, God's imposed blindness prevented them from perceiving the moral glory of Jesus, as John describes.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

In the early days of Jesus' ministry, many Jews glimpsed aspects of His glory and initially received Him as a man of God. By the end, however, that perception had vanished: they saw only a deceiver and blasphemer.

For centuries, Israel has remained blind to the beauty of Jesus' character—a beauty readily apparent to others. Judaism's view of Jesus is unique among major world religions: while others honor Him to varying degrees—at minimum as a good moral teacher—Judaism alone rejects Him entirely, seeing none of His glory.

Stumble to Fall

Blind to Jesus' glory and seeing only a blasphemer, many Jews turned against Him and His followers—attacks that were, in truth, directed against God Himself. They became enemies of God. This blindness caused them to stumble from their position of nearness to God and fall from their privileged role as His people—a tragic yet typical consequence of spiritual blindness.

I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Romans 11:11

The blindness God imposed on Israel caused them to stumble and fall. Yet their fall was not His ultimate goal. His purpose in it was that the gospel might go to the Gentiles. In extending the gospel to the Gentiles, however, God was not abandoning the Jews. Rather, He continues to stir them to jealousy by lavishing His blessings on the formerly unclean Gentiles. His ultimate purpose in this blinding is to draw Israel back to Himself.

By blinding Israel and sending salvation to the Gentiles, God has not abandoned the Jews. His strategy is to provoke jealousy: as Jews witness their God blessing former outsiders, they may become jealous enough to turn from self-righteous pride and return to Him.

Romans 11: God is Good

At the dawn of Israel's history, God promised Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). Some extend this to Abraham's descendants, teaching that Christians must actively support and bless modern Israel. Others argue that Israel forfeited any special privilege by rejecting and crucifying the Lord Jesus, and should now be treated no differently than any other nation.

In the Old Testament era, Gentiles who sought the true God generally had to approach Him through Israel, showing respect to His chosen people in whose midst He dwelt. With the sending of the Holy Spirit, however, God opened direct access for Gentiles without going through Israel. In fact, believing Gentiles are now brought nearer to God than unbelieving Israel (Eph. 2:13). If Jews desire that same intimacy in this era, they must come the same way—through faith in Christ. In terms of nearness to God, Israel is no different from any other nation.

Except Israel had become enemies of God and His people—the initial persecutors of believers. Moreover, God Himself had blinded them. In practice, antagonistic Israel stood farther from God than many Gentiles, who proved more receptive to the gospel.

On the other hand, Paul emphatically declares that God has not cast away His people. He has neither revoked the everlasting covenant nor ceased reaching out with the gospel. In a real sense, they remain "beloved for the sake of the fathers" (Rom. 11:28) and retain a future purpose. This suggests Gentile believers should continue to regard them with a measure of honor and hope.

Thus, throughout church history, Gentile Christian leaders have held sharply differing views on how to regard and relate to the Jewish people.

Apostolic Perspective

Paul deeply desired the salvation of unbelieving Israel. While Christians generally affirm a desire for all unbelievers to be saved, Paul's longing went further. He saw Israel's restoration not merely as their own blessing, but a profound enrichment for all nations.

Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! Romans 11:12

Generally speaking, in Gentile nations where the gospel has flourished, prosperity has followed. The wealth they have enjoyed—monetary, artistic, scientific, cultural, and above all spiritual—defies full calculation. Israel's fall has indeed brought great blessing to the Gentiles.

Yet Gentile nations have endured heavy conflicts, frequent wars, poverty, and injustice. Despite centuries of effort, lasting peace and prosperity remain elusive. It is increasingly clear that their only true hope lies in the Lord Jesus when He rules the nations.

Paul knew the Old Testament prophets foretold that the Lord Jesus will bring peace to the nations when He reigns on earth. His kingdom will begin with Israel's restoration and grow to fill the whole world (Isa. 11:9–10, Dan. 2:35, 44). As beneficial as Israel's fall has been for the Gentiles, Paul knew their restoration would bring even richer blessing.

For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Romans 11:13-15

Although Paul knew God had blinded unbelieving Israel, he never gave up hope for their salvation. He longed for them to be saved, yet found them unresponsive to the gospel he preached. So he turned to the Gentiles—not abandoning the Jews, but seeking to provoke them to jealousy by bringing Gentiles to their God.

Paul understood that bringing the gospel to the Gentiles was the most direct path to Israel's restoration. He also knew that their full inclusion would bring an outpouring of God's blessings to the world. His attitude towards Israel, therefore, was to pray earnestly for their salvation while proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles.

Reality in Metaphor

When Jesus came, many in Israel harbored a sense of superiority over the Gentiles, viewing themselves as God's people and therefore inherently better. They forgot that God chose them not for their merit, but for His purpose.

Paul recognized the danger that Gentile believers might succumb to the same arrogance toward unbelieving Jews. To counter this, he vividly described the reality of God's ongoing relationship with both groups in the verses that follow.

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. Romans 11:16

Paul begins with the metaphor of firstfruits—the initial ripe grain of the harvest. Moses instructed Israel to offer a portion to the Lord (Lev. 23:10). Being dedicated to Him, this firstfruit grain was holy.

They were also to offer loaves baked from this firstfruit grain (Lev. 23:20). These loaves were holy not through any inherent perfection, but solely because of their connection to the holy firstfruits.

Paul draws on this familiar Old Testament imagery to introduce a new metaphor: a holy root and its branches. Just as holy firstfruits impart holiness to the loaves, a holy root makes its branches holy. The branches derive holiness solely from their connection to the root—not vice versa. Paul's key point is clear: holiness is from the root to the branches; the branches possess no inherent holiness.

In the metaphor, the root represents God, who alone is inherently holy (Rev. 15:4). All holiness in creation derives from Him—no one imparts holiness to God. Just as He is the source of all life, with every living being tracing its existence back to Him, so every holy being derives its holiness solely from Him.

The branches represent the people of God. Their holiness comes from God alone, expressed in nearness to Him and sharing in the blessings of His life. They possess no inherent holiness.

In the Old Testament, God set Jacob's descendants apart as His people. They were holy in the sense that they dwelt near Him and enjoyed the blessings of His life. Yet this holiness was not inherent—they could be defiled by uncleanness. When they

departed from God, following idols, they became unholy and forfeited those blessings.

Jesus, as one of Jacob's descendants, was utterly different than any created being: He was inherently holy. He departed from the Father's side, became man, walked among sinners, and remained holy—because He is God.

During Jesus' ministry, Israel appeared to be near God, being zealous for the Law and Prophets. Yet they rejected Jesus' words—the very words of God. In rejecting Him, they departed from God Himself. As a result, He broke them off from the holiness and blessings of His life that they had known.

And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. Romans 11:17-18a

God did not break off all the Jews; a remnant received Jesus and continued in nearness to Him. To this remnant, God added Gentiles who accepted His invitation to reconciliation and closeness. He made them His holy people along with the believing Jews and bestowed on them the richness of His life through the Holy Spirit.

It is crucial to recognize that, in this metaphor, grafting branches onto the tree does not represent individuals becoming saved. It cannot because the broken-off branches symbolize Jews who rejected Jesus—people who were never saved. Their removal cannot mean losing salvation, for one cannot lose what one never possessed.

The ungodly Jews who rejected Jesus had previously lived in physical nearness to God. In a physical sense, they were a

holy people, partaking of His blessings—until broken off. Gentiles, once far off, were brought near in Christ (Eph. 2:12–13). Thus, branches attached to the tree represent those made holy in that they were near to God and shared in the goodness His life. Broken-off branches represent those removed from that nearness.

Holy by Association

God brought us Gentiles near not because we were more deserving than the Jews, but because we received Christ. Only in the holy Lord Jesus are we made holy and brought near (Eph. 2:13). We Gentiles have no more grounds for boasting in our nearness to God than the Jews ever did.

But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. Romans 11:18

Our nearness to God does not make Him holy; rather, He makes us holy by bringing us near to Him. Apart from Him, we are common and unclean. We possess no inherent superiority or holiness over the Jews who reject Jesus.

Yet some object to this doctrine, saying that there must be some reason God set aside the Jews to bring in the Gentiles.

You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Romans 11:19

The objection claims that God did not break off the Israelites arbitrarily. Surely their rejection of the Lord Jesus and demand for His crucifixion crossed a decisive line. After all, God did break them off.

Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.

Romans 11:20-21

The reality is that God did not break off the Jews because of their cruelty to His Son. He broke them off because of their unbelief in the Lord Jesus. Nor did He bring in the Gentiles because they were kind to His Son—Gentiles, after all, drove the nails through His hands and feet. He brought in those Gentiles who believed in the Lord Jesus.

This is not to say that a person with faith is holier or morally superior to one without it. On the contrary, those who have faith leading to salvation have recognized their own moral bankruptcy. At the moment of salvation, they are acutely aware of their lack of holiness. They draw near to God not out of perceived superiority, but because they believe His word.

God does not save those who see themselves as holier than others—He saves sinners. So He takes no pleasure in Gentiles who look down on Jews who rejected His Son. Rather, He delights in those who fear Him and tremble at His word (Isa. 66:2)—people who know they are not inherently holy and trust solely in the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

Romans 11:22

God extends His goodness to repentant sinners, but severity to those of His people who reject His Son. He withheld the Holy Spirit from unbelieving Jews—even temple priests who

daily ministered before Him—leaving them outside the intimate relational life He shares with believers.

The Jews considered themselves good and devout, with no need for repentance. They expected God's blessing on that basis. Yet God extends His goodness only to the repentant—not to those who have no need for repentance.

If we believers suppose ourselves good and devout—with nothing to repent of—we cannot expect to experience the goodness God pours out on the repentant. He will show the same severity toward us in our self-righteousness, rendering us like branches cut off from the goodness of the tree's life. When we consider ourselves better than others, we don't share in His life.

Being cut off does not mean losing salvation; it means exclusion from God's goodness. His supreme goodness is His mercy and grace toward repentant sinners. Believers who feel morally superior see no deficiency in themselves and no need for mercy. Without sensing God's mercy, they cannot enjoy His goodness toward sinners—and are effectively cut off from it.

Plagued by moral superiority, the Jews saw no need for personal repentance and refused to call on the Lord Jesus. As a result, they were cut off from the goodness God extends to repentant sinners.

And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? Romans 11:23-24

God's goodness lies in His readiness to receive and bless repentant sinners. Should any unbelieving Jew repent and believe, God will welcome them into His goodness just as readily as He has welcomed us Gentiles. If He freely embraces former heathen Gentiles, He will certainly do the same for ethnic Jews.

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. Romans 11:25

Our perspective on the Jews should be this: God has not cast them away. He has blinded them for a season, temporarily excluding unbelieving Israel from the full goodness of His life while the gospel goes out to the Gentiles. Once the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, Israel will be restored.

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins." Romans 11:26-27

God foretold a time when He would remove Israel's guilt and restore them to Himself (Isa. 59:20–21). He foresaw their rebellion against His Son and was not taken by surprise. He has not cast them away—He will restore them.

Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Romans 11:28-29

At the time Paul wrote, unbelieving Jews led the persecution of believers and were enemies of the gospel. Yet they remained God's people—the descendants of Abraham and Jacob, bound by an everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:7). God does not make an everlasting covenant only to revoke it later. He does not change.

The simple fact is that God is sovereign: He never abandons His promises nor takes back His gifts. He promised to bless the world through Abraham and his descendants, and He will fulfill that purpose despite all opposition.

We must grasp that God will accomplish His purpose, lest we fall into arrogance toward unbelieving Jews. Instead, we should marvel at the greatness of His wisdom, by which He is saving the whole world—including the Jews.

For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Romans 11:30-32

Historically, Gentiles were disobedient, rejecting God's word. Yet through the Jews' disobedience, God extended mercy to them. He used Israel's act of disobedience in rejecting His Son—and their role in the crucifixion—to provide salvation designed for the disobedient.

The Jews, once relatively obedient to God's word, are now counted disobedient. They rejected the word spoken by His Son and became enemies of those who believed. They became fully disobedient to God's word.

As disobedient, they now qualify for the very mercy God shows to the disobedient. He poured out mercy on historically disobedient Gentiles through the Lord Jesus. Jews, being now disobedient, can receive the same mercy.

By committing the Jews to disobedience, God was not cutting them off. He was qualifying them for mercy in Christ. His purpose is to show mercy to all—Jew and Gentile alike.

True, God blinded the Jews—but only for a limited time. This blindness led to their great disobedience in crucifying His Son. But God used that disobedience to bring salvation suited for the disobedient, extending mercy to the disobedient Gentiles.

Now the roles have reversed: the Jews have become the disobedient by rejecting the Son God sent. Yet He has provided salvation specifically designed for the disobedient. The mercy shown to us disobedient Gentiles can now be theirs as well. God blinded them to bring about this disobedience, so that He might show mercy to all—disobedient Gentiles and disobedient Jews alike.

Wisdom

God's method to accomplish His purpose is the very blindness that might appear to thwart it. He blinded unbelieving Jews, leading to the crucifixion of Jesus—an act He used to bring salvation to the world. Through this, He stirs Israel to jealousy, ultimately to restore them as His people and bless the whole world through them.

*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and
knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past*

finding out!

“For who has known the mind of the LORD?

Or who has become His counselor?”

“Or who has first given to Him

And it shall be repaid to him?”

*For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to
whom be glory forever.*

Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

Truly, God's wisdom stretches the limits of our comprehension. It is a profound challenge merely to grasp what He has done. Yet even if we begin to understand, it is utterly overwhelming to imagine how He devised such a plan. Understanding a brilliant strategy is one thing; conceiving it is entirely another.

Who can fathom the mind of the Lord?

Who could ever presume to counsel Him in His planning?

Truly, the Lord depends on no one for wisdom.

He is completely sovereign—not because He crushes all opposition with raw power, but because He possesses the wisdom to turn the very efforts of His opponents toward the fulfillment of His purpose.

His sovereignty rests not on mere power, but on wisdom beyond comprehension.

Section 3

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About the Author



Caleb Bulow resides in the wide-open spaces of North Dakota alongside his wife, kids, and a couple of lovely grandkids. As a regular Bible teacher at youth camps and churches, he loves working slowly and prayerfully through Scripture until its message rings clear and relevant to daily life. Influenced by voices like David Gooding, he believes true understanding flows from listening attentively to the text rather than imposing our own ideas. Through his writing, Caleb hopes to help believers see God's goodness more vividly—particularly in the passages that stir questions and discomfort.

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