

“It Is Not as Though God’s Word had Failed”

Sermons on Romans # 24

Texts: Romans 9:1-6; 1 Kings 19:9-18

One of the major problems facing the apostle Paul was the thorny relationship between Jew and Gentile in those churches rapidly springing up throughout the cities of the Roman empire. Those Jews who came to believe that Jesus was Israel’s promised Messiah often-times expected Gentile converts to live as Jews. Many felt that Gentiles must submit to circumcision, keep the dietary laws and obey the Law of Moses in order to maintain a right-standing before God. Gentile converts, on the other hand, knew nothing of the Old Testament before coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Their question was simply, “who is Moses?” No doubt, the Gentiles had trouble understanding why Jews wouldn’t eat certain foods and why circumcision was such a big deal. Therefore, at some point in his letter to the church in Rome, Paul must explain the respective roles of Jew and Gentile in redemptive history. Now that Christ has come and fulfilled the Old Testament promises of redemption, Paul must explain Israel’s place in God’s future purposes.

The role of Romans 9-11 in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is the subject of much debate in contemporary biblical scholarship.¹ The problem is this. Is this section of Romans an excursus—a personal detour in which Paul expresses his personal anguish about his people, the Jews—or is this section an essential part of the overall theological argument of the epistle? According to Charles Cranfield, “a superficial reading of the epistle might easily leave one with the impression that chapters 9-11 are simply an excursus which Paul has included under the pressure of his own deep personal involvement in the matter of Israel’s destiny but which is without any real inner relatedness to the main argument of Romans. But a closer study reveals the fact that there are very many features of chapters 1 to 8 which are not understood in full depth until they are seen in the light of chapters 9-11.” If true, this means that “these chapters may be seen to be in integral part of the working out of the theme of this epistle.”²

What are these features which are not fully understood until we come to this section?³ In Romans 1:16-17, in which Paul sets out the thesis statement of this letter—through the preaching of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation, a righteousness from God is revealed—Paul made the point that the gospel which he preaches is the gospel concerning God’s son, Jesus Christ, who, according to the flesh was an ancestor of David, Israel’s greatest king (cf. Romans 1:1-4). Given the fact that Jesus is the Christ (Israel’s promised Messiah), at some point in this letter, Paul must explain how the gospel he preaches relates to God’s people, Israel, since the content of that gospel—the person and work of Jesus Christ—can only be properly understood as the fulfillment of that redemption from sin promised in

¹ Krister Stendahl argues that these chapters are the “climax of Romans.” Cf. Krister Stendahl, Paul Among the Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortress, Press, 1976), p. 4. N. T. Wright comments that “Romans 9-11 is as full of problems as a hedgehog is of prickles.” Wright sees this section as integral to the epistle as it is Paul’s attempt to keep Gentile Christians from marginalizing Jews within the church. See. N. T. Wright, Climax of the Covenant (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 231-235.

² Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.445.

³ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.445-446.

throughout the Old Testament in which David's ancestor was prophesied to play a major role.

Second, in Romans 1:1-4, Paul made a point of the fact that his gospel was promised beforehand in the "holy Scriptures" i.e., the Old Testament. How can the gospel he now preaches be that same gospel found in the Old Testament? Paul must now make the case that with the coming of Jesus Christ, the gospel fulfills that which had been promised and to which the types and shadows of the Mosaic economy had pointed. Therefore, Israel's history is intimately connected to God's saving purposes in Jesus Christ. If Paul is not an innovator, but an apostle called by Jesus Christ himself, Paul must now demonstrate that the gospel he preaches is the same gospel revealed to Abraham.

Finally, in Romans 1:16, Paul made the point that the gospel is for the Jew first and then for the Gentile. In Romans 3, Paul takes up the difficult theme of Israel's state of unbelief at the time Paul wrote this epistle. Thus if the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and the gospel was intended to go first to the Jew and only then to the Gentile, the nagging question now surfaces, "why is it that Israel is presently in a state of unbelief?" Does this mean that God has rejected his ancient people? Does this mean that God does not keep his promises? Or even worse, does this mean that the gospel Paul has preaches is not really the power of God unto salvation? Obviously, this is an issue with which Paul must deal.

Therefore, given all of these important points, I think it is clear that Romans 9-11 is hardly a personal excursus in which Paul is merely expressing his personal feelings about his people. The role of Israel in redemptive history is an integral part of this epistle and is essential in explaining how Jew and Gentile should relate to one another in the church of Jesus Christ, the new covenant community.⁴ This means Paul has an apologetic purpose of sorts throughout these chapters. The apostle must demonstrate that God is faithful to his promise even though Israel is presently in a state of unbelief. Paul must answer a whole series of related questions as to how Israel's present rejection of her own Messiah fits into the larger redemptive-historical panorama. What role will the nation of Israel play, if any, in the future course of redemptive history? Will there be a future millennial age in which Israel will figure prominently? These are not only important questions raised by Paul's gospel and Israel's rejection of her Messiah, but these are issues which divide Christ's church even to this day.

There are several important keys to interpreting these chapters correctly. First and foremost, we must see these three chapters as a unit—the main points Paul raises to answer the questions about Israel's role in God's on-going redemptive purposes run throughout the entire section. It would be nice if we could go through this whole section in one sitting, but because of time constraints and the need to spend several weeks on this section, we can easily fail to see the interconnectedness of the points that Paul is making.

⁴ According to Cranfield there is a very important reason as to why Paul must address this topic at this point in this epistle. "In Romans 8:28-30 Paul has referred to God's special purpose as the ground of our certainty. But, according to the Old Testament, the nation of Israel has a special place in God's purpose. The end of this section was therefore a natural point at which to introduce the relation of Israel to the divine purpose. We may, in fact, go further and say that at this point the need for such a discussion has become urgent, since the very reliability of God's purpose as the ground of Christian hope has been called into question by the exclusion of the majority of Jews. If the truth is that God's purpose with Israel has been frustrated, then what sort of a basis for the Christian hope is God's purpose? And if God's love for Israel (cf. Deut. 7:7; Jer 31:3) has ceased, what reliance can be placed on Paul's conviction that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ?" Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.446-447.

Second, a key word throughout this section is mercy. The word occurs seven times in this section alone (one other time in Romans, once in Galatians, once in Ephesians and five times in the pastorals).⁵ Whatever role Israel has played in the past or will play in the future is centered in God's ultimate redemptive purposes—to be merciful to his people, whom Paul has already described as ungodly Gentiles (Romans 4:5) and self-righteous Jews (Romans 2:17 ff) but who are now both justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of the merits of Christ alone.

Finally, these chapters not only explain the redemptive historical relationship between Jew and Gentile in the church so as to answer the pastoral problems regarding how Jew and Gentile relate to each other in church, but they also enable us to distinguish between national Israel (Jews by birth and circumcision) and true Israel (the elect remnant according to grace who trust in Jesus Christ). How does Israel's plight lead to Gentile salvation? What role will the nation of Israel play in the future, if any? What will happen to Paul's people? Will they remain under the covenant curse forever? Or will God show mercy upon Israel and graft her back into the righteous root from which they have been presently cut-off?

As we turn to our text in Romans 9:1-5, Paul addresses the tragic fact that his own people the Jews, and the nation of Israel, now find themselves under the judgment of God.

The present condition of Israel presents serious pastoral and logical problems for Paul. As I have just mentioned, in Romans 1:16-17, Paul wrote these words: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"* This declaration not only connects the gospel to a righteousness from God, it also raises a major conundrum. If the gospel is the power of God for salvation, and if the gospel goes first to the Jew and only then to the Gentiles, how is it that Israel presently stands under God's curse? Does this mean that God not faithful to his promise? Or that the gospel is not truly the power of God unto salvation?

This matter is especially significant when we remember that in the previous section, Romans 8:28-30, Paul had written the following: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."* If God's sovereign election is effectual, and that all those who are numbered among the elect also will be justified and gloried, then the question must be answered as to whether or not the people of Israel were ever numbered among the elect. And if they were, how did they lose their favored status?

Therefore, Paul must address the subject of Israel's role in redemptive history not only because of the issues raised by the mission to the Gentiles and the way in which Jew and Gentile must relate to one another in the church, but there are also profound theological issues to be dealt with as well. If, until the coming of Jesus Christ, the nation of Israel has enjoyed a redemptive-historical priority, what benefit did this priority bring to the chosen people if they now find themselves under God's curse? Were these real blessings or a just a deceptive way bringing about a foreordained curse? Therefore, lurking underneath this discussion is a real apologetical question. Is God good? And does he keep his promises?

⁵ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 345; Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, II.448.

In Romans 9:1, we find a significant change in tenor and tone in Paul's emotions. In Romans 8:31-39 Paul has set out one of the most glorious doxologies found in all of Scripture. Paul has taken us to one of the true high points in the entire New Testament exalting in the glories of God's grace in Jesus Christ and how nothing could separate us from God's love. But now without the use of either conjunction or particle, Paul abruptly changes his tone. The thought of the glories of the gospel has, apparently, brought to Paul's mind the terribly sad fact of Israel's present condition of desolation. His own people are not participating in any of the blessings he just described. And Paul's mood changes dramatically from the soaring heights of Romans 8:31-39 to the real despair of Romans 9:1-4a. *"I speak the truth in Christ -- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit -- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."*

That Paul is very impassioned about what follows is clearly seen in the first verse of Romans 9. Paul not only states that he speaks the truth in Christ, he is equally emphatic that he is not lying or speaking falsely. Paul's conscience (a reference to being in or out of conformity with the commandments) is confirmed by the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit bears witness both to the truth of the commandments and to our conformity to their righteous requirements.⁶ This means that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth of the things in written word of God, since the Holy Spirit is not only responsible for the inspiration of Scripture, but also its authentication to the people of God.

And to what fact is Paul's conscience bearing witness? That he is in great sorrow (literally great "pain") and unceasing anguish for his people Israel, whom he describes in the following verse as "cursed" and "cut off" from Christ. The word for "cursed" here is *anathema*, meaning, therefore that Israel is facing the full fury of God's covenant curse, a horrible fate.⁷ The seven woes that Jesus spoke to the leaders of Israel as recorded in Matthew 23 are already coming to pass. Recall that in Matthew 23:38, Jesus told the pharisees and teachers of the law, *"Look, your house is left to you desolate."* When Paul writes Romans nearly 30 years later, these woes are already being realized and will fully come to pass when the Roman army sacks Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Israel will be desolate and its temple profaned.

Given Paul's great sorrow for his people, it is his impassioned prayer that he could take upon himself Israel's *anathema* so that his people might be saved from the curse. Paul would rather be damned himself than see Israel come under the curse. But Paul's prayer is not offered as though this reversal of fortune is a hypothetical possibility. Rather, it is a rhetorical lament, hence the NIV's translation: *"For I could wish."* Israel's rejection of her Messiah is now a painful reality for Paul—although this does not diminish his hope for better things to come, namely the future conversion of his people to the gospel of Jesus Christ, after the fulness of the Gentiles has come about.

So grieved is Paul that the apostolic lament for Israel continues in the latter half of verse 4 and verse 5 that he gives us a list of the real advantages that Israel possessed and which have been squandered through unbelief. *"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."*

⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 556.

⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 557.

In these two verses, Paul lists some of the privileges Israel has enjoyed throughout the Old Testament. The list constitutes a brief summary of much of the drama of redemption until the coming of Jesus Christ. But sadly, the list also “serves at the same time to underline the sadness of the Jews present unbelief.”⁸ How could Israel fall from such great heights? How could a people who possessed so many great and wonderful blessings fall so far into unbelief? This is why Paul’s anguish is so great and explains his change in mood as he contemplates the consequences of Israel’s unbelief.

The first blessing mentioned by Paul is that Israel has been adopted as sons. This is significant because Paul elsewhere argues that Christian believers receive divine sonship through the work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:15; 23; cf. also Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5). Since the term “adoption” does not appear in the Old Testament, it is probably best to understand Paul’s reference to Israel’s adoption in light of the Old Testament’s teaching about Israel as “God’s son” in passages such as Exodus 4:22-23; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:6; 2:10. Such sonship adheres to the nation as a whole when God sets the nation apart for his service.⁹ The use of the term may indicate that while Israel is presently under God’s curse, God may restore this privilege to Israel, if and when Israel embraces Jesus Christ as her Messiah when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in—a point Paul will take up in Romans 11:25-26.

The second blessing is that Israel has participated in the divine glory. This refers to the historical manifestation of God’s glory throughout Israel’s history. Third, Israel has received the covenants, no doubt a reference to the covenant of grace, God made with the great patriarch Abraham, and the works-based covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Both of these covenants are framed against the backdrop of the prior covenant of works God made with Adam in Eden as discussed in Romans 5:12-21.

The fourth blessing is the law, a reference to the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. As Paul has already argued, the law is spiritual, and therefore, holy, righteous and good. The problem is that given human sinfulness and the comprehensive nature of the flesh, the law not only excites us to sin, but the law also provokes ever greater and greater levels of sinfulness. The law was a blessing to Israel because it is not only a revelation of the righteousness of God, but God also gave the law to point Israel to Jesus Christ in whom it is fulfilled. But this is the very thing Paul’s unbelieving brethren have failed to see. The law is not an end in itself—it was intended to lead Israel to its author.

The fifth blessing is worship, as God instituted the sacrificial system which even under the works-based Sinaitic covenant, provided for the forgiveness of sins through the shedding of blood, but pointed the people to the coming one, the promised redeemer who will save his people from their sins. Sixth, God gave to Israel the promises, no doubt a reference to all of the promises God made to Israel through the covenant of grace, including a land, a people, and a nation, which ultimately culminated in the coming of Jesus Christ. Of course, the sign of the promise is circumcision, which sadly had become the occasion of stumbling for Israel, since the people had come to view it, not as a sign of the promise, but a meritorious work, an error, which, in part, Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is designed to correct.

The seventh and final blessing has to do with the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through whom the promise was revealed and fulfilled. It is through these men that God’s promises are fulfilled. To be a child of Abraham is to be an heir to the promise. Unfortunately, Israel came to believe that this promise

⁸ Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, II.459.

⁹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 562.

was fulfilled through the flesh and external conformity to the law, and not through faith in the promise.

The next clause (the final part of verse 5) contains one of the most significant assertions in this entire epistle: “*from [the patriarchs] is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!*” As we know from the gospels and Paul’s opening comments in Romans 1:3-4, Christ’s human ancestry can be traced back to Abraham and David (Matthew 1; Luke 3). Indeed, a significant part of the redemptive drama in the Old Testament is the record of God’s preservation of the promised seed from the seed of the serpent. It is important to trace Christ’s human ancestry because he is “*God over all, forever praised.*” While this is a disputed translation, if correct, this is one text in which Paul explicitly calls Jesus Christ “God.” Even though this is most natural translation, it is this explicit assertion of Christ’s deity which motivates many critical commentators to understand the verse as follows: “from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ. God is over all, forever praised!”

According to Cranfield, there are a number of reasons to favor the reading adopted by the NIV. The most important of which is that this follows the pattern of other Pauline doxologies which connect the person named to the preceding comments. A second point is simply that wherever the word “*blessed*” appears in such contexts, it is always the first word of a sentence. Third, the phrase “*according to the flesh,*” suggests a contrast with what follows; i.e., the patriarchs v. Christ. And finally, this is the most natural way to read “who is”–Christ, who is God over all.¹⁰ As Douglas Moo points out: “connecting ‘God’ to ‘Christ’ is . . . exegetically preferable, theologically unobjectionable, and contextually appropriate. Paul here calls the Messiah, Jesus, ‘God,’ attributing to him full divine status. The frequent association of God with ‘blessed’ makes it likely that these should be kept together.”¹¹ It is only theological bias which prevents some from seeing this as a Pauline reference to the deity of Christ, something he clearly does elsewhere in Philippians 2:5-7, (Christ, the image of God) Colossians 2:9, (in whom all the fulness of the deity resides), and Titus 2:13 (where Paul speaks of, “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ”).

As we conclude, we turn to Romans 9:6, which provides the interpretive key to much of what follows. While this verse belongs to the next section of Romans in which Paul discusses God’s sovereign freedom in regards to election, and we will turn to this verse again next week, it is important to lay out at this point in our series how the distinction Paul makes between true Israel and national Israel impacts the way in which we understand what follows.

In Romans 9:6, Paul writes, “*It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.*” Paul begins to answer the question of Israel’s present unbelief with a very important assertion. Israel’s present condition of being under God’s curse and cut-off from the inheritance is not due to the failure of God’s word. God’s word does not fail because God cannot fail. The reference to “God’s word” might be a narrow reference to the gospel (which contains God’s word of promise), but is more likely a reference to the Old Testament which contains the account of all of the privileges mentioned in verses 4-5. “Therefore ‘the word of God’ is God’s Old Testament word with particular reference to his promises made to Israel.”¹²

¹⁰ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.464-470.

¹¹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 568.

¹² Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 573.

God promised those things specifically mentioned above. The fact that Israel has not received them does not in any sense mean that God or his word have failed. The solution must be found elsewhere in God's mysterious redemptive purposes and how they will play out in the future. The distinction upon which Paul bases his discussion in this section regarding Israel, election, and the role of Jew and Gentile in subsequent redemptive history is a very simple but essential one: *"not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."* There are two groups in view then when Paul discusses the role of Israel throughout what follows in the balance of Romans 9-11. As Paul sees it, there is a narrower group ("not all Israel") and a broader group ("all Israel"). The broader group, "all Israel" refers to "national Israel," when emphasizing the national promises, or ethnic Israel (i.e. "the Jews"), when emphasizing the people themselves. This broad group is the group to whom the promises described above have been made, but who have sought to attain these promises not through faith, but through good works or simply because of their ancestry. This is why they stand under God's curse—they have rejected the substance of that which God has entrusted to them, that Jesus Christ is Israel's Messiah and that in him all of God's promises are "yea and Amen."

The narrower group, "not all Israel," is variously known as "true Israel," or "spiritual Israel," and is that group presently in possession of all the things promised to God's people under the Abrahamic covenant. This group are the true descendants of Abraham from among the broader group. They are much like the seven thousand believers whom God preserved during the days of Elijah (about whom we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning). They believe the gospel promise and are numbered among the elect. Therefore, God's word has not failed because even though the broader group (national Israel) has been left desolate and is presently under God's curse. The narrow group (true Israel) which is made up of all of those ethnic Jews who have embraced Jesus Christ through faith, has received that which has been promised. These Jews have been justified through faith and reckoned righteous on account of Christ just as the Gentiles have. They serve as Paul's hope for better things yet to come for national Israel, in that God will once again pour his mercy out upon Israel and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ.

As we will see in the coming sermons, when Paul speaks of Israel's future he does so not in terms of an earthly millennium nor in terms of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. He does so in terms of God's mercy going first to the Gentiles and then rebounding back to Israel at the end of the age. For Paul, Christ is reigning even now, extending his kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. The Abrahamic covenant is already fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the people of God (Jew and Gentile), beginning at Pentecost. The very fact that countless Gentiles have already come to faith in Christ, means that God has fulfilled his covenant promise to Abraham and is blessing the nations through the person of his son, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the reason "all Israel" does not believe the promise and has fallen under the curse has to do with the fact that fallen human nature deceptively leads us to think our own righteousness is sufficient to account us as righteous before God and not because the gospel has somehow failed and that God does not keep his promises to his people. No, Paul's hope for Israel's future lies in that very same gospel he preaches and in the blessed mercy that God will once again pour out upon his ancient people (the Jews), even as he has already shown such mercy to the Gentiles.

Beloved, it is not as though God's word has failed. God's word cannot fail. For God's word contains the promise that he will justify all those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ in faith, whether they be Jew or Gentile. For he is merciful to all those willing to renounce their own righteousness and seek that justifying righteousness from God which is freely given through the gospel, to all those who believe.