

Exegetical Analysis of Romans 9:1-13

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1-2 – I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, [2] that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. (1. Ἀλήθειαν λέγω ἐν Χριστῷ, οὐ ψεύδομαι, συμμαρτυροῦσιν μοι τῆς συνειδήσεως μου ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ, 2. ὅτι λύπη μοι ἐστὶν μεγάλη καὶ ἀδιάλειπτος ὁδύνη τῇ καρδίᾳ μου)

The previous context (i.e. chapter 8) spoke of the obligations which the Gospel would lay upon Christians, both to Jews and Gentiles, which included a life of holiness, and that they were to pursue life in the Spirit not in the flesh. We now move into an entirely different section here in chapters 9-11. This transition here begins with Paul making a solemn oath before Christ and the Holy Spirit that he is telling the truth. “Only when the Spirit controls the conscience can it be trusted.”¹ The Spirit and the Word of Truth testify that Paul’s heart is in the right place here. What is Paul telling the truth “in Christ” about? Vs.2 tells us that Paul has great sorrow and unceasing or unending grief in his heart. Why is Paul in anguish? From his conclusions of love at the end of chapter 8 this seems to be a change of pace for Paul. Paul is going to unpack his heart’s desire in chapter 10, but for now he will share why his heart is grieved.

3-5 – For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, [4] who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, [5] whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (3. ἡυχόμεν γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα, 4. οἵτινες εἰσὶν Ἰσραηλῖται, ὧν ἡ υἰοθεσία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ αἱ διαθήκαι καὶ ἡ νομοθεσία καὶ ἡ λατρεία καὶ αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι, 5. ὧν οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν)

For (γὰρ) connects us back to vs.1-2 and now Paul will tell us why his heart is grieved. Paul wishes that he could be “accursed/separated” (ἀπὸ) from Christ for the sake of his brethren. To be accursed in the Greek is to be anathema (devoted to destruction). Paul knew that this exchange was impossible as he had already mentioned that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ, but *if* he could, he would clearly swap places for his brethren. Who are Paul’s brethren (ἀδελφῶν μου)? Paul tells us that his brethren are the “kinsmen according to the flesh” (τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα). Paul’s usage of “kinsmen according to the flesh” in vs.3 proceeds into vs.4 where Paul tells us the exact representation of who the “kinsmen” are. The kinsmen to Paul are his brethren (the Israelites). These brethren are physical descendants of Jacob. Like Paul, his brethren were also Jews, and they are the ones that Paul is grieved about.

¹ John MacArthur, *Romans*, The MacArthur Bible Commentary, 1534.

Paul has yet to declare why he wants to be accursed, but he will tell us who these Israelites are. The Israelites here are “according to the flesh”. Notice that they are not in accordance to the Spirit. So, these aren’t believing Jews, they appear to be the unbelieving Jews. Paul tells us that these the physical descendants (Israelites) had a special place in God’s sovereign plan. John Murray states it this way: “The attachment to Israel is not due merely to naturalities. It is accentuated by the place Israel occupied in the history of revelation.”² Israel had always occupied an important place in God’s plans. They were the people to whom belonged the adoption as sons. They were sovereignly selected as God’s people (Deut. 7:6-8). They received the covenants (i.e. Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New). The glory of the Lord was upon them up until the Shekinah glory departed in Ezekiel. God tabernacled among them. God gave them the Law through the means of the typical mediator Moses. The function of worship in the Old Testament came through the temple services. The blessings and promises were dispersed to Israelites (whether they believed or not). The “fathers” or patriarchs arose as leaders of the Jewish people. These patriarchs are the very root and foundation of the Olive Tree (Rom. 11). To cap that all off, the promised “seed” was to come from the Israelites. The seed is Christ (Gal. 3:16). Now why the usage of “flesh” in relation to Israel? It seems odd that after attributing all that God has done for Israel, that Paul would refer to them as “according to the flesh”. John Gill says that the term “according to the flesh” is used to “distinguish them from his spiritual brethren and relations; for though they were brethren in a national sense, they were not all so in a spiritual relation.”³ As Gill rightly points out, Paul here is attempting to show his sadness for his brethren, the unbelieving Jew. Paul says in Romans 11:7-8 that Israel was seeking, but what they were seeking for they did not obtain. There were clearly those chosen who obtained it, and the rest were hardened. Paul is going to contrast 2 groups of people here, one of the “flesh” the other of the “spirit”. It is at this point the obvious question arises and the reason for Paul’s writing of these 3 chapters (9-11) surfaces. If Israel has been given such a special place in God’s plans why is it that they are not believing in him? Why are they rejecting their Messiah, while the Gentiles are flocking to him? How is this possible? The immediate question that would be raised is: Has the Word of God failed? Has God failed to achieve his purposes through the people of Israel?

6 – But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel. (6. Οὐχ οἷον δὲ ὅτι ἐκπέπτωκεν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. οὐ γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ οὗτοι Ἰσραήλ)

Paul’s immediate response to the obvious question is to clear up the notion that the reason for their unbelief is because the Word of God or the Promises made to them have failed. This response is automatic from the text. The failure really lies in the inability for his audience to understand the promises and how they ought to be fulfilled (v.6a). The kinsmen according to the flesh were mistaken in thinking that just because they participated in the blessings and promises that this somehow made them right with God. The Jews thought that by having “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” as their Fathers that they were in good relation with God:

Matthew 3:8-9 NASB

² John Murray, *Romans* in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, Vol II, 4.

³ John Gill, *Romans* in John’s Gill’s Exposition of the Whole Bible, Website:
<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/geb/romans-9.html>. 1999.

Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; [9] and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

John 8:33-34,37-39 NASB

They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?" [34] Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. [37] I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. [38] I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore, you also do the things which you heard from your father." [39] They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham.

The point that is being made is that it is not enough to have these fathers by virtue of physical descent and be in a right relationship with God. What follows (vs.6b-13) must be answer the implied question directed by Paul. Why has Israel rejected their Messiah? In (v.6b) Paul says something radical to any listening Jew. Not everyone who physically descended from Jacob is an Israelite. Paul destroys the notion that just because you're an Israelite by physical descent doesn't make you a true Israelite. Paul had already remarked about this in chapter 2. He had distinguished between those who had been reliant on the Law and on the flesh but had not been spiritually circumcised in the heart. This allows us to look in the heart of Paul to understand why he is grieved. The Jews had rejected their Messiah, as Paul will further state in Romans 11, they have been cut-off and hardened. Yet, there is still hope for the “kinsmen according to the flesh” when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in (Rom. 11:25-27).

7 – nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." (7. οὐδ' ὅτι εἰσὶν σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ πάντες τέκνα, ἀλλ' ἐν Ἰσαὰκ κληθήσεται σοι σπέρμα)

Paul has clearly and emphatically stated that there is “an Israel” within Israel. The proper term that should be used here is True Israel. There are believing Jews that are within the larger paradigm of Israel. These Israelites have been born-again by the Spirit of God. Paul will now identify these “true Israelites” and will distinguish them from the kinsmen according to the flesh. Paul introduces the term “children” here and will use that in contrast with those who are of the flesh. Again, just because a Jew could appeal to Abraham as their physical father didn't mean that they were “all children” (πάντες τέκνα). The ones that are the children of Abraham are the ones that are “through” (Ἐν) Isaac's trail of descendants. This means that the true offspring of Abraham are the ones that are of the spiritual seed, not of the physical seed. This will be an important point that will be raised again in the letter to the church in Galatia (chapters 3-4).

James D.G. Dunn provides a helpful summary:

“God had told Abraham that his promise of seed and land applied only to the line of descent through Isaac, that so far as his covenant with Abraham was concerned only Isaac and his offspring would be recognized as Abraham's seed.”⁴

⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans* in the Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 38B (Romans 9-16), 547.

8 – That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. (8. τοῦτ' ἔστιν, οὐ τὰ τέκνα τῆς σαρκὸς ταῦτα τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας λογίζεται εἰς σπέρμα)

Just so that Paul's audience could not be mistaken, he further clarifies saying "That is" (τοῦτ' ἔστιν). Paul says that it is "not" (οὐ) the children (kinsmen) of the flesh who are children of God, but rather it is the children of the promise that are truly regarded as descendants. It is at this time that we have hit the root of the argument. Paul's entire point is summarized nicely here.

Note: There is clearly no mention of "Gentiles" in the context of Paul's argument up until this point. While it is true that the Paul says in Galatians 3 & 4 that Gentiles appeal to Abraham as their spiritual offspring or spiritual father, by means of faith, it does not follow that Gentiles are to be seen as "Christian Israel", "Spiritual Israel", or "True Israel". Paul's entire thesis is to establish a clear distinction between the "unbelieving" and "believing" Jew. Paul is not grieved over the Gentiles, because the Gentiles are coming to faith and have been brought near to the promises as heirs (Eph 2-3). Paul's grief pertains to a single group the "children of the flesh" who are being hardened and who are not regarded as the children of God.

9 – For this is the word of promise: "At THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." (9. ἐπαγγελίας γὰρ ὁ λόγος οὗτος· κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τοῦτον ἐλεύσομαι καὶ ἔσται τῇ Σάρρα υἱός)

Paul is now going to seek to demonstrate the validity of his prior statement. The conjunction (γὰρ) is used again tying it back to the previous passages. Paul is reminding his audience that the proof for his prior statement is found in Genesis 18:10. It is here that the Word promised, or better yet that the Lord himself promised that a time that was predetermined by God that Sarah would have a son. This was the word of promise, the promise that Abraham believed. It was this promise (by faith) that Abraham was clinging to.

From Sarah came forth Isaac and from Hagar came forth Ishmael. Ishmael was not the chosen one that God had planned to bring forth the word of his promise, but it was Isaac. Isaac is the spiritual offspring by which the promise plan of God would go forth.

Galatians 4:21-31 NASB

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. [23] But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. [24] This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. [25] Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. [27] For it is written, "Rejoice, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND." [28] And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. [29] But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. [30] But what does the Scripture say? "Cast OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR the SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL

NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN." [31] So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

It is important to see the contrast here.

HAGAR	SARAH
Physical	Spiritual
Ishmael	Isaac
Physical Jerusalem	Jerusalem Above
Bondwoman	Free Woman
Flesh	Spirit

This is important to understanding Romans 9. Hagar, as the bondwoman, gave birth to Abraham's physical offspring Ishmael as a result of the flesh or can be noted according to works. These two can be compared to the covenant established at Mt. Sinai which is physical Jerusalem and her kingdom. Sarah on the other hand represents the free woman and not the bondwoman who gave birth to Abraham's spiritual offspring Isaac as a result of the promise of God, which was in accordance to the Spirit. Sarah and Isaac represent the Spiritual covenant and Spiritual Kingdom which is represented by the Jerusalem up above. Sarah and Isaac represent a "type" a shadow of regeneration, and spiritual birth. Remember that God must intervene for Sarah as she is well past the age to be barren. For Sarah to give birth to her son (Isaac) she needed to have her womb regenerated. Thus, resulting in a physical + spiritual descendent, which is contrasted against Abraham's attempted works to bring about the child of promise with Hagar on his own.

Ishmael represents: Unbelieving Israel, born according to the flesh, the present Jerusalem.
Isaac represents: Believing Israel, born according to the Spirit, the Jerusalem above.

John Murray says this:

"The seed to whom the promise was given or, at least, the seed whom the promise had in view are those in whom the promise takes effect; they are "children of the promise"."⁵

10 – And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac (10. Οὐ μόνον δὲ, ἀλλὰ καὶ Ῥεβέκκα ἐξ ἑνὸς κοίτην ἔχουσα Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν)

Paul says, "if that is not good enough, here I will further prove my point". He starts by furthering his defense by saying "and not only this". He now moves from Sarah to Rebekah. Rebekah had also conceived and brought forth twins (Jacob and Esau). Esau was the first born and the rightful heir to the blessings that came from the patriarch Isaac. However, even though that may be true, it was Jacob (Israel) who was chosen by God, as we will see.

Note: As one goes through Romans 9 there is a clear depiction of the sovereignty of God. It is

⁵ John Murray, *Romans* in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, Vol II, 12.

clear as we are proceeding through the passages that God has a sovereign plan and that he is working out that sovereign plan amidst a rebellious people.

11 – for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls (11. μήπω γὰρ γεννηθέντων μηδὲ πραξάντων τι ἀγαθὸν ἢ φαῦλον, ἵνα ἡ κατ' ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ μένη)

For many, this is an incredibly difficult text to read. There is a clear and emphatic connection between God's sovereignty and God's elective purposes. This passage alone demonstrates that God is sovereign, and that he unconditionally elects apart from anything the man could do. This is further supported by the statement in vs. 16. Again (γὰρ) is used to demonstrate the connection to the prior passage. Though the twins (Jacob and Esau) were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that *God's purpose according to his choice would stand*. Take a moment to ponder the truth of that statement. The twins were not yet born and had not yet done anything but what matters above all else is "God's purpose" and it is in accordance to *his* choice, not our own. God's purpose to "elect" (ἐκλογὴν) is what matters here. Such that his plans would stand. Jacob and Esau hadn't even done anything, yet God had purposed to chose Jacob over Esau. This is a deep truth that must be dealt with in great awe. God's elective purposes are contingent upon nothing but his own choice. There is nothing in any of us Jew or Gentile that caused God to chose us, or to investigate the future to see how we would act. His choice is entirely contingent upon his good pleasure such that his plan would be sustained and upheld. God is the one who calls and the one that sets to reconcile the sinner to himself. Here is one of the clearest places that we see that.

Note: Some may attempt to see this verse as non-related to soteriology, but this simply cannot be the case. Paul's usages of words that clearly parallel the previous chapter (8). Paul's usage of "God's purpose", "His choice", "works", "calls" are all soteriological. They are all interrelated to God's purpose to save a people for himself. At this point in the conversation there is nothing that would lead us to conclude that this is "national, or corporate" election. There are clearly individuals here that are chosen and elected to salvation.

12 – it was said to her, "The OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." (12. οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος, ἐρρέθη αὐτῇ ὅτι ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι)

Paul's quotation here come from Genesis 25:23. Some try to use this text to argue that there was an election to "service". Again, the election must be individualistic as it pertains to individuals who have been elected within Israel. The entire point here is that "individuals" not a corporate entity has been elected to salvation. When evaluating the two passages that are quoted in the OT context they are clearly speaking about nations. However, the reason Paul is not referring to nations here is because it makes no sense to introduce a national argument at this point, when the entire thesis Paul is presenting is to move away from the nationalistic or corporate entity. It is also important to note that Paul doesn't quote the entire passage, but only that which applies to his thesis. His thesis surrounds "true Israel" not the nations.

Genesis 25:23 NASB

The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from

your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger."

13 – Just as it is written, "Jacob I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." (13. καθάπερ γέγραπται· τὸν Ἰακώβ ἠγάπησα τὸν δὲ Ἡσαῦ ἐμίσησα)

This passage is a clear indication of God's election unto salvation and election into reprobation. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. Paul's purpose is not to get us fixated on nations but rather on election.

Romans 9:11 NASB

for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that [God's purpose according to His choice] would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

Jacob was loved by God, because before he was born God demonstrated his love to him. He set his love upon Jacob and not Esau... Because GOD chose to have mercy on Jacob:

Romans 9:14-15 NASB

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! [15] For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

Titus 3:5-7 NASB

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, [6] whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Conclusion:

We can now answer the question as to why Israel rejected her Messiah? Because God has not elected them to salvation, they have been cut off. God's choice is his individualistic election is what answers the question of Romans 9:1-5, and why Israel is in a state of unbelief. The nationalistic argument (Israel + Edom) doesn't answer the question of why Israel is in a state of unbelief. The children of promise/children of the flesh (election unto salvation, and reprobation) is exactly what is in view here. God chooses whom he desires, he hardens whom he desires, and no nationalistic argument will ever trump the glorious truth of unconditional election.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 NASB

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. [14] It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Timothy 1:9 NASB

who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,