

# The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

## **III. ISRAEL'S REJECTION OF THE MESSIAH (9:1-11:36)**

Here we enter into the last major section of the theological block of this letter (1:18-11:36). This section covers the 9th through the 11th chapters. In order to better understand this section of material we will need to enlarge upon what was said in the introductory lesson concerning the historical setting and recipients of this letter. It is thought by some scholars that Paul is only addressing Jewish Christians in this section. This is not the case. He is addressing, in diatribe format, at least two different groups. Following is a working scenario of the development of this community of believers at Rome.

### **To Whom Is Paul Speaking?**

The beginnings of the church in Rome can most probably be traced to the conversion of certain Hellenistic Jews and, perhaps, Jewish proselytes who had visited Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast of 30 AD, recorded in Acts 2. This church was initially made up of Jews and proselytes, who continued to remain a part of the synagogue, and then eventually the godfearers associated with the synagogue (i.e., Gentiles other than proselytes attracted to the Jewish religion, cf. Acts 13:14-16, 26, 43-50; 17:1-5a, 16-17; 18:4).

A major conflict apparently developed within the Jewish community as a result of the synagogue's reaction to these Jews who believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. Consequently, the Jewish community (including the Jewish Christians) was expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. This left the godfearers, and the proselytes; to carry on this

messianic movement and keep this newly developed messianic community alive.

### **The Godfearers and New Converts**

During the absence of the Jewish Christians the godfearers continued to arouse interest in their story of the coming of God in this person Jesus of Nazareth. These godfearers began to lead other Gentiles to faith and the church continued to grow. When the Jewish Christians returned to Rome following the death of the Emperor Claudius, they found the church under the influence and leadership of the godfearers and filled with Gentile converts.

### **The Return of the Jews**

These returning Jews, who considered themselves to be the ones having established the church in Rome, began to insist on the restoration of a more Jewish interpretation of Christianity and the acceptance of certain Jewish practices on the part of these godfearers and newly converted Gentiles. When the Gentile Christians refused to accept these demands, an ongoing debate developed resulting in a serious conflict within the community of believers. As a result of the events leading to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, the Jewish Christians had become disassociated with the synagogue. The church was the new focus of their religious life. Their exclusively “Jewish” interpretation of Christianity now filled the Roman church with controversy over how much Jewish practice and belief should be accepted and enjoined upon the church.

When Paul wrote to the church at Rome, he had very likely been well informed of this situation by his associates who were from Rome (e.g., Aquila and Priscilla [Acts 18:1-3; Rom 16:3], and others). If so, he would be, throughout this letter, addressing the concerns of these two different groups.

At the heart of this controversy would have been such questions as: If Christians are the true sons and daughters of God (those created anew in Christ), then what about the Jews? If God promised the Messiah to the Jews, how did he come to be the savior of the Gentiles? If God is now the God of the Gentiles, what has happened to his relationship with the Jews? Are they accursed and cast off forever?

Within this controversy there appears to have also been a developing prejudice toward the Jews, no doubt resulting from the elitist attitude of these Christian Jews, not to mention the synagogue's antagonistic attitude toward the church. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, immediately comes to the defense of the Jews, his people, and addresses the issues of their present state of rejection by God.

## **1. Israel's Present State of Rejection (9:1-29)**

### *(1) Paul's Concern for Israel (9:1-5)*

*I speak the truth in Christ--I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit--<sup>2</sup>I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup>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, <sup>4</sup>the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. <sup>5</sup>Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.*

Throughout this section, Paul develops the thesis that God has rejected Israel because Israel has rejected their Messiah, who was none other than the very Son of God. This same theme is found in Jesus' parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24) and the parable of the wicked tenants (Luke 20:9-19).

### **Israel the Chosen**

In this text (9:1-5), Paul sets the stage for his discussion by expressing his anguish, and even dismay, that Israel is in its present state. These were the people to whom God had made his name known, the people he redeemed from enslavement and called his sons (Exodus 4:22). His very presence and power dwelt in their midst and from the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant he had revealed his glory. They were the recipients of the oracles of God, to them was given the law, the prophets, and the writings. Their temple and its service was divinely ordained. They could trace their heritage as God's people back for centuries to the earliest figures to walk the earth - the patriarchs. Above all, out of their midst God had appeared as one of them, in order to deliver them from an enslavement far worse than the

enslavement of their forefathers in Egypt. He had delivered them from the satanic powers of sin and death.

### **Rejection of the Messiah**

They, however, wanted nothing to do with such a deliverer or such deliverance. As John later wrote in his gospel, "He came to his own and they who were his own received him not" (John 1:11). Just who it was that actually came here is a critical part of this issue. Scholars are divided as to how the Greek of verse 5 should be translated. It reads literally, "out of whom [is] the Christ according to the flesh, the one being over all God blessed into the ages, amen." Is Paul here ascribing the title "God" to Christ? Does he believe that Christ was God? (Cf., Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-19; and Titus 2:13)

What may we conclude from all this? Israel was lost because they would not respond to God's deliverance; but why? Perhaps the greatest reason is that they did not believe that they were in an enslaved and lost condition. In Egypt the fathers were humbled in their enslavement, here Israel was arrogant in its enslavement. Rather than realize that their elitism, their self-righteousness, and their legalism alienated them from God, they were convinced that these attitudes endeared them to God. After all they were God's special people - they were a compliment to God. They had made themselves righteous - worthy of fellowship with God. They had enthroned God's law at the center of their lives and of national Judaism.

Theirs was one of the worst forms of idolatry, an idolatry that makes "self" the center of one's existence. These kinds of people usually become the most ruthless and unloving people of the society of men and they do all they do in the name of service to God. This Paul knew all too well and perhaps here was the reason for his anguish.

#### ***(2) What God Has Done Is Not Inconsistent with His Promise to Israel (9:6-13)***

*It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. <sup>7</sup>Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned [Gen. 21:12]. <sup>8</sup>In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children,*

*but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. <sup>9</sup>For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son [Gen. 18:10, 14]." <sup>10</sup>Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. <sup>11</sup>Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election (Greek *eklego*, passively, to be selected, to voice a choice) might stand: <sup>12</sup>not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger (Gen. 25:23)." <sup>13</sup>Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated (Mal. 1:2,3)."*

Here we come to the first question of the diatribe running throughout this section (chapters 9-11). The question of Paul's imaginary opponent: "Has God's word failed - has he gone back on his promises?" God had promised Abraham, "In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 22:15-18). Paul's reasoning in response to this question is not the syllogistic argumentation of a Greek philosopher; rather, it is the *midrash* (exegesis) of the rabbis. The Hebrew word *midrash* means "to examine, to look closely." It is characterized by "word-plays" (i.e. the special use of certain words or phrases) from which a given line of argumentation may be developed to establish a certain theological point.

### **The "Seed" of Abraham**

This is what Paul does here. His argument develops out of a play on the word "seed," as concerns the meaning of the true "seed/descendent" of Abraham. A true Israelite is one who is true to faith (i.e., he believes God) as was the case with Abraham, the father of faith. Israel did not believe God when he spoke in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; therefore, those who considered themselves Israel according to the flesh were not the true seed/descendent of Abraham (i.e., those who exemplify Abraham's faith).

### **The "Promise" of God**

Paul also develops a play on the word "promise." God's word is sure. When he makes a promise, his word outweighs everything else; and children who emerge out of God's promises are children of God more so than children who emerge out of ethnic flesh, Jewish or otherwise. His reasoning is that children who come into existence as a result of their belief in God's promises are truly the children of God. Therefore, God has not

gone back on his promise to Abraham. Those whose existence is characterized by faith in God's word are the true seed/descendants of Abraham.

### ***(3) God's Rejection of Israel Is Not Unjust (9:14-18)***

*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! <sup>15</sup>For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion (Exodus 33:19)."<sup>16</sup>It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. <sup>17</sup>For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:16)."<sup>18</sup>Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*

Some see in these verses an example of God's election (or predestination) of Jacob over Esau. He picked Jacob before he was born to be the chosen one to carry the seed of promise (Abraham's seed). The children of Jacob (renamed "Israel") were the elect ones through whom the promise to Abraham was to be fulfilled, and Esau's seed would just go off and become the Edomites.

So, the argument runs, if God knew beforehand what child of Isaac would carry the seed of promise, and that child was to be Jacob, then it was his will that Jacob be the chosen one and he made it so. Or, more specifically, he caused all that happened to Jacob and Esau to come to pass – he foreknew what would happen, predetermined that it was to happen that way, and then set things in motion so that they would happen that way.

What we are talking about here is a concept called "cognitive causation;" i.e., that God's knowledge of what would happen (his foreknowledge) actually caused it to happen the way it happened – because God knows what will happen, he causes it to happen.

### **Foreknowledge of God and Cognitive Causation**

These verses were used by 16<sup>th</sup> century theologians of the reformed tradition as a proof-text for the doctrines of foreknowledge and predestination. This interpretation works from an assumption (or

presupposition) that cannot be established as logically valid, sound, or true. The assumption is that, **“to know something will happen is to cause it to happen.”** This is thought to be especially so with God.

### **The Principle of Cause and Effect**

This type of thinking finds little to no acceptance in any field of rational thought. In the field of natural science, the cause and effect principle is clearly established and accepted. One can say with a degree of certainty, “the sun will come up tomorrow morning.” One may give a reasonably accurate prediction of the weather by looking at certain cause and effect factors.

The laws of gravity and kinetic energy are accepted scientific principles, established by the principle of cause and effect, and the list could go on with a number of other recognized phenomena of our world. In the demonstration of any of these cause and effect phenomena, no one would seriously argue that a prior knowledge of the outcome of an action is the cause the outcome. Prior knowledge of an action is not, necessarily, the cause of the action (or effect).

### **Precognition and Prophetic Knowledge**

But, it is argued, this is not the same as God having foreknowledge of a future event. The argument here has to do with cognitive causation and knowledge of future events (effects) in a precognitive sense, as in predictive prophecy.

But, if one looks carefully at this phenomenon, he finds himself reaching the same conclusion as above. It simply does not follow that having prior knowledge of the outcome of a future event causes that event to occur. This is especially so with precognition or foreknowledge of events foretold in biblical prophecy.

### **The Foreknowledge of the Prophets**

The prophecies of Isaiah foretelling of the coming of the Messiah implies that Isaiah clearly had knowledge of events that were to later occur, but his knowledge of these matters did not cause the Messiah to come or cause any of the messianic prophecies to happen.

The prophet Jeremiah had knowledge of the coming captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, but his knowledge of the coming of the Babylonian captivity did not cause it to happen. Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian captivity that a remnant of the Jewish captives would return to Judea, but his knowledge that this would occur did not cause it to happen. Daniel foretold of the historical development of the nations of Babylon, Greece, and the Roman Empire, but the fact that he knew of these events had nothing to do with causing them to happen.

### **Precognition in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, John the Baptist knew that one was coming after him who would be the Messiah, but his knowing and proclaiming that this was going to happen, did not cause it to happen. Jesus knew that he would be crucified, but he did not cause it to happen. Peter said in his sermon on Pentecost that the determination of the Jewish leadership to kill Jesus is what caused the crucifixion it to happen. Even though God had foreknowledge of what was going to happen, they were the ones who caused it to happen. “You by the help of wicked men,” Peter said to the Jews, “put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23).

Jesus knew of the persecution his followers would experience, but he did not cause it to happen. Jesus foretold of the events of the judgment, that some would be condemned and others would go into eternal life, but no one could reasonably argue that Jesus knowledge of what was going to happen is what caused some of them to be condemned and others to be given eternal life. He, in fact, says to them that it was their behavior that had determined their destiny. Paul knew of the events of the second coming of Christ, as recorded in 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 1 Cor 15, but his knowledge of any of these happenings cannot be understood as the cause of them.

If it is the case that prophets and apostles had prior or precognitive knowledge, or foreknowledge of events that had not occurred, and their knowledge cannot be the cause of the effect (events) they foretold, then it would follow that to know that something will happen does not cause it to happen.

But someone may argue that it is different with God because he is omniscient and he is sovereign. The fact that he is omniscient means that he knows all things, not that he causes all things, and the fact that he is

sovereign means that his will rules the universe and if anything or anyone defies or violates his sovereign will, it or they will suffer the consequences, whether a phenomenon of physical nature or the behavior of a human being.

Here in the Romans 9 text, Paul informs us that God knew of Israel's disobedience, and, knowing that, set a plan in place to redeem them as well as all others of the human race. The fact that he knew of Israel's unfaithfulness does not mean that he caused them to be unfaithful. The fact that he knew of Esau's defiant behavior, and consequently, chose Jacob to be the one whose seed would fulfill the promise to Abraham, does not mean that he caused the behavior of Esau. God acts on the knowledge he has, whether knowledge of the past, present, or future.

Paul says that God is not unjust when he makes his choices, knowing what he knows, his decisions are all the more just. He, however, does not cause to happen what he knows will happen. The fact that God knew what Pharaoh would do, does not mean that he caused Pharaoh to act in defiance of his demand that he let the people of Israel go. What it does mean is that God's knowledge of Pharaoh's behavior was a factor he took into consideration in the course of events that were set in motion by the players of this drama.

### **The Hardening of the Heart**

Concerning the matter of God hardening the heart; the imagery here is drawn from Exodus 4-12. How did God harden Pharaoh's heart? How does anyone influence someone else's behavior or cause them to feel or behave a certain way? The most obvious way is by direct force, by the use of power or authority.

Secondly, one may indirectly cause a person to think, feel, or behave in a certain way. This can be done by the use of reason or persuasion, but it may also be done, as was the case with Pharaoh, by confrontation; i.e., placing them in a situation where they will act in a predictable manner.

From this narrative it may be seen that the expression "hardened the heart" is a poetic metaphor for Pharaoh's defiance of God. Each time God confronted Pharaoh with a challenge to his authority, Pharaoh responded predictably in defiance of the will of God; i.e., he hardened his heart. God's actions may be seen as the cause of Pharaoh's reaction and, in this sense,

God may be spoken of as hardening Pharaoh's heart, but this does not mean that Pharaoh's will was not usurped in the process.

This same type of idiom may be seen in contemporary expressions such as someone doing something to make another person angry. A person's behavior may be spoken of as making another person angry, but one may not imply that he is the direct cause of that person's decision to become angry. One would ever think of accusing that person of overwhelming the other person's personality and in some mysterious or supernatural way causing him to become angry. Yet, this is the interpretation given the same type of language in God's dealings with Pharaoh.

### **Conclusion**

We are responsible for our decisions and our behavior, and the consequences resulting from our decisions and actions are our own doing and cannot be blamed on God and anyone else. It seems that one of the greatest failings of mankind is to accept responsibility for his behavior. People behave as they do because they think as they do. If we think that someone else, even God, is responsible for what we do, then how can anyone be held accountable for what he does, or what he doesn't do that he should do?

MWLIII