

Paul's Letter to the ROMANS

UNIT EIGHT

The Problem of Israel's Unbelief

- It may seem at first glance that Romans 9-11 'interrupt' Paul's main argument.
- However, a detailed reading shows how significant these chapters are to the epistle as a whole.
- Relationship of chapters 9-11 to what precedes:
 - The gospel which was 'promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures' (1:2) was clearly meant to be a message of good news for Israel.
 - When the gospel is proclaimed, 'the righteousness of God' is revealed.
 - God's faithfulness or righteousness in the face of the unfaithfulness of the Jews is mentioned in chapter 3.
 - Paul speaks of the righteousness of God being revealed in the provision of Jesus as sin-bearer.
 - In chapter 8 Paul comes to the point of dealing with the certainty of Christian hope.
 - In the Old Testament Israel had a special place within God's purpose and yet many Israelites remained hardened to the gospel.
 - If God's purpose with Israel has been frustrated, what basis is there for the Christian hope expounded by Paul?
 - In chapters 9-11 he moves on to consider the unresolved problem of the righteousness of God and Israel's unbelief.

- Relationship of chapters 9-II to what follows:
 - These chapters also provide an important preparation for what is to come.
 - This is part of Paul's explanation of his ministry and travel plans.
 - It may also have been a specific response to problems between Jewish and Gentile Christians who didn't appreciate the part played by both in God's saving purpose.

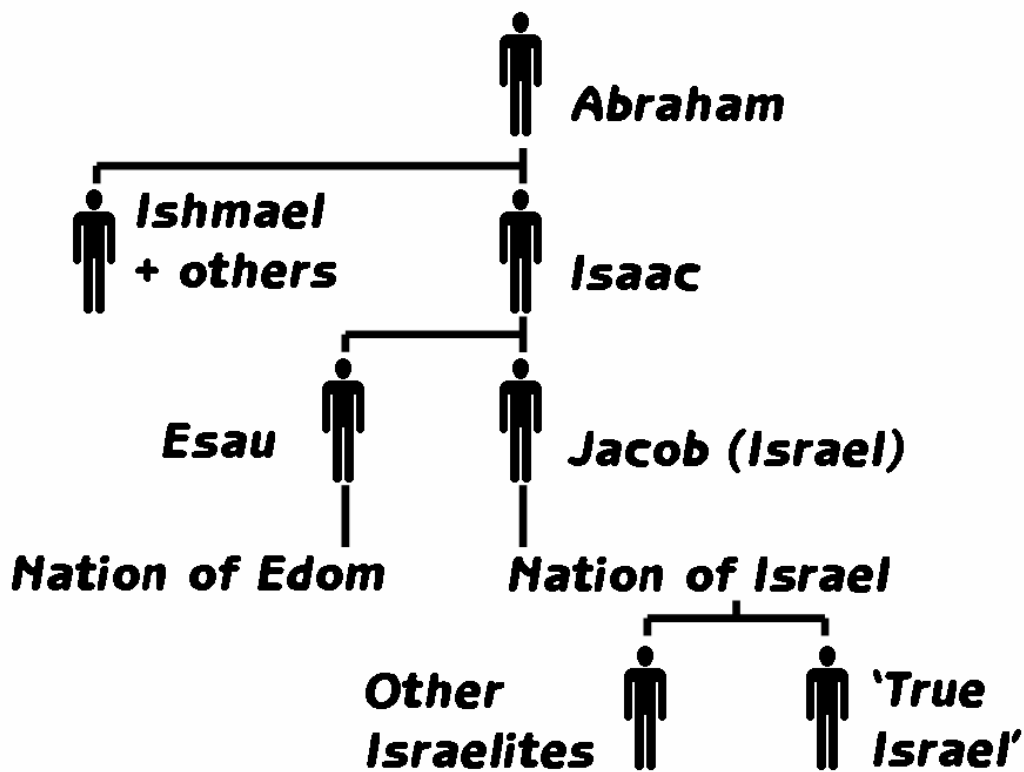
The problem stated: Paul's lament (9:1-5)

- Paul raises the problem of Israel's unbelief with great solemnity and fervour.
- He would, if it were possible, give up everything for the sake of his Jewish compatriots.
- Despite their unbelief, they are still in a position of great privilege and opportunity as the elect people of God.
- God graciously adopted the Israelite nation – this should have led to love, obedience and trust on their part.
- Paul lists the privileges of the Israelite people (9:4-5) – the supreme privilege of the Jews was to have the Christ born as one of them.
- This list not only magnifies the sadness of their rejection of the gospel, but also underlines the continuing fact of God's election.

God's mercy and His elective purposes (8:14-39)

- A process of selection (9:6-13)
 - The unbelief of the Jews does not mean that God's purposes have been frustrated or that they have failed.

- The present situation should be understood in the light of a process of selection which already operated in the Old Testament.
- Not all descendants of Israel (Jacob) belong to 'the true Israel', not all descendants of Abraham are the 'children of God' in the sense mentioned in 4:11-25.
- Of Abraham's sons, God's promises descended only through Isaac, and of Isaac's sons the descent was through Jacob, not Esau.
- This has nothing to do with human merit, but rather depends on God himself as the one who calls people into relationship with himself.
- Verses 12 and 13 refer to the relationship between Jacob and Esau and their descendants – the descendants of Jacob were chosen, the descendants of Esau were not.
- The focus is not on the election of individuals to eternal life, but on the choice of a nation to fulfil a particular purpose in God's plan for the world.



- A question of mercy (9:14-29)
 - Paul rejects any suggestion that there may be injustice on God's part.
 - God said to Moses "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.
 - This shows that God's mercy is free from any sort of manipulation by humans.
 - Introducing any question of fairness or justice into the discussion we obscure the fact that election is solely an expression of divine mercy.
 - Another Old Testament quotation points to a very different expression of God's mercy.
 - God uses Pharaoh to reveal his saving power and truth to the nations, even though Pharaoh's heart is hardened in unbelief.
 - Paul stresses that God must be free to appoint people to various functions for the fulfilment of his purposes for the world.
 - God endured Pharaoh and the rebellious Israelites in Paul's time for the ultimate purpose of making known 'the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory'.
 - Those in rebellion against God ('vessels of wrath') may still be moved to repentance and faith and become 'vessels of mercy'.
 - Paul stresses that this has already happened to some, including himself, but emphasises that only a remnant of Israel will be saved (9:27-29).

Israel's guilt and fall (9:30-10:21)

- Their pursuit of righteousness (9:30-10:13)
 - Paul says that the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, obtained it through faith, but the Israelites who had been given the law did not obtain righteousness.
 - They pursued the law as if it were based on works – if they had pursued it through faith they would have recognised their need for mercy and recognised Christ as the goal of the law.
 - It was a legalistic misunderstanding of the law which led them to reject Jesus.
 - Paul continued to pray for the unbelieving Israelites, as he believed they could still be converted to Christ.
 - He recognised that it was ignorance at the heart of their knowledge of God which led to their disobedience and a belief that they could establish their own righteousness.
 - Those who refuse to acknowledge that righteousness must be the gift of God will not humble themselves to 'submit to God's righteousness'.
 - The purpose of the law was to bring Israel to see the need for the gift of righteousness that is available for all who have faith.
 - The idea that Christ is the goal of the law, bringing righteousness to 'every one who has faith', is explained in 10:5-13.
 - Moses spoke of the 'righteousness which is based on the law' – the obedience he required may be termed 'the obedience of faith', this would have led faithful Israelites to Christ.
 - In 10:6-11, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy – this passage in its original context also called on people to obey the covenant and so to live and be blessed by God in the Promised Land.
 - God promised to enable to people to do this, but they did not respond to his initiative, and their failure to respond to the gospel is a continuation of this failure from Old Testament times.

- Paul saw a parallel between the giving of the law and the coming of Christ.
 - In both cases, the proper response was to receive with gratitude and trust the gracious promise of God, expressing faith through obedience.
 - God continues to draw near to people through the preaching of the gospel, and the proper response is to believe that word and to confess one's allegiance to God in Christ.
 - Such confession is intimately connected with the belief that he was raised from death.
 - Salvation or eternal life and justification are God's gift to all who call upon Christ as Lord and Saviour.
- Their rejection of the gospel (10:14-21)
 - The quotations of verses 14-15 suggest a logical sequence of events that must take place if people are to call upon Christ as Lord and be saved.
 - Authentic preachers must be authorised and sent by God, they must preach the gospel so that Christ may be heard speaking through his messengers and those who hear may believe.
 - The problem in Israel was that 'they have not all obeyed the gospel'.
 - To obey the gospel is to believe it and to believe in the Christ who is its content.
 - Paul states that faith comes from what is heard – have the Jews not had enough opportunity to hear the gospel?
 - The gospel has been preached almost everywhere that Jews were to be found, so was the problem one of understanding the gospel?
 - The Old Testament quotations in the closing verses make it clear that God always intended to use the Gentile nations to establish Israel's guilt in rejecting the true knowledge of God.
 - God would allow himself to be found and understood by Gentiles who did not seek him, and would continue to hold out his hands in mercy to Israel.

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UNIT NINE

Jews and Gentiles in the Plan of God

- Paul continues to emphasise that 'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew' (11:2).
- His merciful plan to save all Israel involves the mission to the Gentiles.
- When the Jews and the Gentiles respond to the mercies of God with the obedience of faith, they are united in a new fellowship of love in Christ.

God's purpose for Israel (11:1-36)

- A remnant chosen by grace (11:1-10)
 - Paul dismisses any suggestion that God has rejected his people.
 - He points to himself as an example of a Jew mercifully brought to Christ and appointed to bear the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike.
 - Paul again focuses on the election of Israel, and looks back to the time of Elijah who was tempted to consider himself the only faithful one left.
 - God assured Elijah that he had preserved a faithful remnant and that his plans for Israel were not thwarted.

- Applying this to his own time, Paul emphasises that again a remnant exists because of God's electing grace, not because of human merit.
 - Jews like Paul have been brought to faith in Christ through God's grace – there would be no hope for the majority if the remnant existed because of works, as their works were just as lacking as anyone else.
 - No-one deserved to receive salvation – by God's grace the 'elect' obtained it while the rest were hardened, but Paul does not see that hardening as being necessarily permanent.
 - This state of spiritual insensibility is God's will for the moment, but is not his last word to his rebellious people.
- The salvation of 'the rest' (II:II-24)
 - Paul denies that the rest of the Jews have stumbled so far as to be beyond salvation.
 - Their rejection of the gospel is serious, but in God's plan this led the early Christians to take the gospel to the Gentiles.
 - Paul wants the Jews to be included, and focuses his ministry on the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy and thus to faith in Christ.
 - If their separation from God has brought reconciliation for the Gentiles, then their acceptance by God will mean nothing less than 'life from the dead' (II:15).
 - Paul uses the imagery of dough offered as the first fruits of the newly ground flour.
 - That small offering serves to sanctify the whole, just as Jews like himself who have come to faith in Christ serve to sanctify the unbelievers.
 - Paul also uses the imagery of the 'branches' being sanctified by a holy 'root'.
 - The rejection of the unbelieving Jews is described in terms of branches being broken off from the root.
 - The acceptance of the Gentiles is described as being like a 'wild olive shoot' grafted in amongst the remaining branches.

- The Gentiles are warned against despising the natural branches (the Jews), and encouraged to remember that the basis of their own support will always be the root.
- The mystery of God's merciful plan (II:25-36)
 - Paul explains that God's plan involves the hardening of a part of Israel in unbelief until the conversion of the elect from amongst the Gentiles, and 'so all Israel will be saved'.
 - To some extent these will overlap, as Paul expects the salvation of some Jews to result from his mission to the Gentiles.
 - However, Paul's main point is that the salvation of 'all Israel' depends upon the bringing in of the full complement of the Gentiles.
 - 'All Israel' need not mean every single Jew without exception, but rather 'Israel as a whole'.
 - Paul associates the taking away of the sins of Israel with the coming of the divine Redeemer – apparently associating the salvation of 'all Israel' with the return of Christ.
 - Although he does not necessarily expect the salvation of every single Jew, Paul does believe that God will deal mercifully with Israel as a whole.
 - The final destiny of unbelieving Israel is that they, like the Gentile Christians who once were disobedient, should receive mercy.
 - God has 'assigned all men to disobedience' in the sense that he provides no way to escape the consequences of rebellion until in his mercy he releases them (II:30-32).
 - His purpose is that all alike might depend on his mercy for salvation.

Responding to the mercies of God (12:1-21)

- The obedience of faith (12:1-2)
 - The opening verses of chapter 12 form an important bridge from the theological arguments of the first eleven chapters and the practical exhortations of the concluding chapters.
 - When Paul refers to 'the mercies of God' he means God's saving purposes in Christ, as expounded in the letter so far.
 - The appeal to 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice' is based on the teaching of the compassion of God – the gospel rightly understood is the basis for truly Christian living.
 - We cannot be justified by works, but once we appreciate God's goodness in providing a way of justification through Christ we should be moved to yield ourselves to him in obedience.
 - The use of sacrificial language in 12:1 indicates that the worship which honours God is the free surrender of the individual to God in thankful obedience.
 - The obedience of everyday life is 'spiritual worship' – what we do in church services must develop worship in this wider sense.
 - Although spiritual growth and development is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, it is the responsibility of believers continually to allow themselves to be transformed.
 - Only the mind that is yielded to the Spirit for renewal through the instruction of Scripture is able to recognise and respond to the will of God.
- Serving God in the Christian congregation (12:3-13)
 - It is significant that Paul moves from general statements about yielding to God our thankful obedience to exhortations about responsibilities to other Christians.
 - The proper functioning of a congregation is clearly a priority in the will of God.

- Christians should not esteem themselves too highly, but sober judgement is needed – ‘according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him’.
 - This does not refer to different amounts of faith – every Christian has been justified by faith alone, and we are to estimate ourselves according to this God-given standard.
 - We are ‘individually members of one another’ – what ever gifts we have were given for the benefit of others in the congregation, not for self-glorification.
 - All different gifts are bestowed by God’s grace, whether prophetic, teaching, service or caring for the sick.
 - Such gifts can only be discovered by focusing on the needs of others – gifts will arise to meet the needs.
 - The theme of caring for one another is continued in verses 9-13 – the exhortation to genuine love is the key to what follows in the rest of the chapter.
- **Serving God in the face of persecution (12:14-21)**
 - In verses 14-21 Paul is mainly concerned with the relations of Christians with non-Christians – the exhortation to ‘bless those who persecute you’ reflects the teaching of Jesus.
 - It means praying for God’s blessings on your opponents and seeking for sympathetic and caring relationships with all.
 - We are not the ones to take vengeance – there will be a day when wrongs are avenged.
 - To retaliate is to be ‘overcome by evil’ – Christians are to ‘overcome evil with good’.
 - Such behaviour is possible only for those who don’t allow themselves to be ‘conformed to this world’ but do allow themselves to be transformed by the renewal of their mind.

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UNIT TEN Love in Action

The debt of love (13:1-14)

- **Christians and the state (13:1-7)**
 - Although Roman officials regarded Christianity with disgust, and the governing authorities were godless, Paul urges that every person is to be subject to them.
 - This means recognising that it is God who sets up and overthrows rulers, even those who do not acknowledge his authority themselves.
 - To fail to obey the civic authorities is to rebel against God's order and will lead to his judgement.
 - Ideally rulers should punish evil and praise and encourage good – functioning as God's servants, executing his wrath on the wrongdoer.
 - The Christian should fulfil his duty to the state not only to avoid punishment but because of a consciousness of a personal obligation to God in this matter.
 - Paul spells out what this means in terms of paying taxes and the respect due to the authorities because of their office.

- Fulfilling the law (13:8-10)
 - Christians are to leave no debt outstanding, except for the debt of love to each other.
 - The statement that 'he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law' refers to the second half of the Ten Commandments.
 - As the debt of love can never be fully discharged no-one can perfectly fulfil God's demands, but when we love others with the same sincerity with which we care for ourselves it is a way of obeying the law and doing what God requires.
 - This is so because love seeks what is best for the other person – going beyond the negative 'you shall not' commands recorded in verse 9.

- A time for obedience (13:11-14)
 - The exhortations of Romans 12-13 become more serious when the significance of the 'hour' is realised (13:11).
 - It is time to be awake and ready for the return of Christ and the fulfilment of God's saving purposes.
 - Salvation for God's people was nearer to Paul and his readers as he wrote than when they first believed.
 - Preceding generations lived with an expectation of the nearness of the End but did not experience the fulfilment of those hopes in their lifetimes.
 - This should not diminish a sense of urgency in Christians today – although we do not know the time fixed by God, we can be certain that the End is 'nearer to us now than when we first believed'.
 - Believers are urged to 'cast off the works of darkness' and to 'put on the armour of light', which means conducting ourselves as those who already belong to the day (verse 13).
 - To put on the armour of light is not simply to strive after certain virtues, but to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 14).
 - There is a need to yield ourselves in obedience to Christ so that his character might be reproduced in us.

Liberty and love (14:1-15:13)

- Welcoming one another (14:1-12)
 - The weakness of faith that Paul mentions here is not a failure to trust God or to accept justification as God's free gift through Christ.
 - The people in question were not seeking to earn a status of righteousness through abstention from certain foods.
 - They simply lacked the assurance that their faith permitted them to do certain things.
 - Paul calls on the 'strong' to welcome the 'weak' – it may have been that the 'weak', who were in the minority, were being poorly treated by the 'strong'.
 - On the other hand, the 'weak' are also encouraged to welcome the 'strong', and not to condemn the 'one who eats'.
 - Christians are not in a position to pass judgement on one another in these matters – each one is a slave of Christ and is answerable to him alone.
 - The 'weak in faith' at Rome may have felt bound in conscience to keep certain ceremonial requirements of Old Testament law.
 - This may also have reflected a division between Jewish and Gentile Christians.
 - Jewish Christians may have lacked the assurance that their faith in Christ gave them liberty in the matters mentioned.
 - Paul as a Jewish Christian had no scruples about abandoning the ceremonial law, but said of others 'let every one be fully convinced in his own mind' (14:5).
 - Each Christian should make a considered judgement, not being swayed by the opinions of others and remembering that whatever is done or not done is to be in honour of the Lord.
 - We belong to Christ in life and death and no longer to ourselves, therefore how can we judge each other – all must give account to God alone.

- **Walking in love (14:13-23)**
 - Paul turns his attention particularly to the strong when he urges them 'never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother'.
 - Paul is convinced from his knowledge of Jesus' teaching that 'nothing is unclean in itself'.
 - However, for those who have not grasped this literal obedience to the law is still a matter of conscience – 'it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean'.
 - It would be possible for these people to be hurt by others encouraging them to act against their conscience.
 - This could possibly result in the spiritual ruin of 'one for whom Christ died' – such selfishness would bring the gospel into disrepute.
 - The strong need to allow time for the weak to become settled in mind about any change in practice that is now allowed in Christ.
 - Pursuing what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding amongst Christians is important – it expresses the reality of God's rule in the congregation.
 - When Paul says 'the faith you have, keep between yourself and God' (14:22), he is not urging Christians to be private about their faith.
 - 'Faith' is used in the sense of conviction – the assurance one may have about liberty to behave a certain way as a Christian.
 - Such freedom does not have to be expressed outwardly to be enjoyed.
 - Paul declared the blessedness of the strong Christian who is untroubled by the things which worry the 'weak in faith'.
 - He contrasts this with those who doubt, but still eat – this is wrong 'because the eating is not from faith'.

- **Glorifying God (15:1-13)**
 - Paul explains that the strong have an obligation to the weak – they have to consider the effects of their behaviour on their weaker brothers and sisters.
 - Pleasing one's neighbour to build him up as a Christian is the duty of love.
 - Paul points out the example of Christ in this respect – he endured the hostility of mankind towards God.
 - If Christ was willing to go that far in not pleasing himself for the salvation of the people, Christians should be willing to forego their own interests for the sake of others.
 - Paul's prayer is that he might enable the Christians at Rome to live in harmony with one another in accordance with the will of Christ.
 - The strong and the weak are to welcome and accept one another despite their differences – without this it will be impossible to glorify God with the sort of unity for which Paul prays.
 - The fundamental reason for welcoming one another is the fact that Christ has accepted both groups.
 - Paul uses four Old Testament quotes (15:9-12) to show that God intended Jews and Gentiles to be united in the fellowship of the Messiah.
 - The section closes with a prayer that God would enable his people to abound in that hope which is theirs in Christ.

Conclusion (15:14-16:27)

- Paul concludes with an indication of his purpose in writing and a number of personal notes (see notes for Unit One).