

Romans 9-11 Have God's Promises to Israel failed?

Introduction

Paul has written some of the most powerful and appreciated words in Scripture in Romans 8 concerned the final triumph of God in the gospel so that all His people will be saved for eternity. The ink has not dried on the scribe's pen after these uplifting words before we could down to earth with a bump. Romans 9:1-5 is a heartfelt cry of the apostle as he wrestled with the fact that after the first few extraordinary years of Jewish people coming to accept Jesus as the Messiah, following the birth of the Church at the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Now, twenty-two years later the number of Jewish people trusting Jesus as their Messiah was down to a trickle in contrast to the increasing numbers of Gentiles coming to faith. Paul could in theory have hidden his head in the sand and ignored the problem, but he wouldn't do that. He is too honest and grounded in Scripture to be evasive on this point. Equally important, many other people were seeking answers to the very same questions that Paul will address in Romans 9-11. In the theologies of many Christian people there is a real problem in accommodating Romans 9-11. Tom Wright has written: 'Romans 9-11 is as full of problems as a hedgehog is full of prickles'! (N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* p.231). The fundamental question here is this: has God finished with the Jewish people and the Nation of Israel? The fact that Paul spends three whole chapters of the book in addressing this question gives a very large hint as to his viewpoint. If as some Bible commentators think the answer is 'yes God has finished with them completely' –why spend so much time on this subject. In addition, if God has finished with the Jews then it is quite natural that the rate of conversions would slow to a trickle and then stop –so what Paul had observed in recent years on his travels was only to be expected. However, I believe it is only possible to take account of Paul's inner anguish in these verses if we are open to the possibility that he believed that the answer to this question is 'no! God has not finished with the Jews and the Nation of Israel'. It was frankly embarrassing for Paul that in his later years his own people were having less and less interest in the message he was proclaiming. Gentile seekers and new converts could rightly ask the question: If the Gospel is good news *first for the Jew and then for the Gentile* (Romans 1:16), why are so few of them willing to receive this good news? I will admit upfront that no view of these chapters fits perfectly with the wide range of biblical evidence on this subject. However, I am convinced that these chapters clearly teach a future for the Jewish people and Israel in the purposes of God and believe that the weight of evidence here allows us to read the other less clear passages of Scripture on this topic in this light.

Has God's Promises for the nation of Israel failed?

(I am indebted to J.M. Boice, *Romans God and History*, Vol.3, pp. 1012-1015 for this approach to this message) No, absolutely not for seven good reasons! These reasons provide an overview outline of Paul's teaching in Romans 9-11. They help to give a framework to our understanding of an approach to the issues Paul raised here. To spend three chapters on a subject in a document sent to a church from which you are seeking support as an overseas missionary, and whom you have not previously been acquainted with in person, implies that this topic is of major importance both to Paul and the congregation in Rome who will receive this letter. This congregation that would until a few years earlier have been led predominantly by Jewish followers of Jesus, would now have an overwhelmingly Gentile membership and leadership team. The reason for this is the expulsion of all Jews from Roman c.49-50AD by the Emperor Claudius. Acts 18:1-2 refers to this decree in passing. *After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.* ² *There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from*

Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them... The decreasing effectiveness of evangelism amongst Jewish people (until the late 19th century AD) combined with Claudius' anti-Semitic persecution led to an increasing separation between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the wider synagogue community. After the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70AD in which Jerusalem was destroyed and the nation's survivors sent into exile as slaves and most significantly because the followers of Jesus took a pacifist stance in that war and refused to fight, the break between the church and the synagogue was complete. Only after the Holocaust and World War Two and the subsequent founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948 did relations between these faith communities begin to regain any positive connections. We need to note that in Romans 9-11 the focus is on God in His sovereignty rather than Christ in His saving activity. Elsewhere in this letter Paul refers to 'the Jews' exclusively rather than 'Israel' the nation; here an occasional reference to Jews but his focus is on 'Israel' mentioned eleven times (L.L. Morris, Romans, p. 345). The questions that were prominent in Paul's lifetime and those raised in the last seventy years have a similar pressing urgency. In addition, in the light of the ill-treatment over the centuries meted out to the Jewish communities by supposed Christian nations, what right do we have to evangelise amongst the Jewish people? These chapters are very important and central in our approach to this topic in Scripture. What does Paul say here in Romans 9-11?

1. All of God's chosen people will be saved (Romans 9:6-24)

Romans 9:8 states: *In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.* Paul is careful to state that being born into a Jewish family does not make you a child of Abraham, in the same way as we would accept that a person being born into a practising Christian family is not automatically a Christian. The emphasis here is on the electing purposes of God in Christ that trumps any ethnic or national distinctives. Paul contrasts the place of Isaac rather than Ishmael and then Jacob rather than Esau in God's purposes for Israel. He then quotes some words of God to Moses from Exodus 33:19: *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.* Here in this context the subjects are Jews, but the same doctrine of election is stated by Paul of the Christian Church in Ephesians 1:4-6: *For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love⁵ He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will –⁶ to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.* What are the practical and pastoral implications of this belief? Quite simply to provide assurance in the midst of the storms of life when things can appear on the surface to be far from what they should be that God is in control. Ultimately your salvation and mine is underwritten by the sovereign will and purposes of God. A child in a human family with no sense of security will model behaviour that is problematic. They will wonder where they fit in and may even make other peoples lives a misery as well at times! When Paul wrote this letter in AD55 anti-Semitic persecution was on the rise in secular Roman society, together with a declining interest in Jesus in Jewish ranks, but God was still on the throne. He guarantees the salvation of His people. It should also encourage us in our prayers. There are people for whom God has prompted us to pray concerning their salvation, but they are showing no signs of interest –so far! Don't give up because if this conviction to pray for this person or people is from Him then it means that in the future they will come to faith in Him. Therefore what Paul says here first is very encouraging to people going through hard times

2. Believing Jews and Gentiles will be saved (Romans 9:23-29)

²³ What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory – ²⁴ even us, whom He also called, **not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?** ²⁵ As He says in Hosea (2:23): ‘I will call them “My people” who are not My people; and I will call her “My loved one” who is not My loved one,’²⁶ and, ‘In the very place where it was said to them, “You are not My people,” there they will be called “children of the living God.”’²⁷ Isaiah (10:22-23) cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, **only the remnant will be saved.** If God had stated that every single Jewish person without exception would be saved then indeed He has failed. But He did not do that. Through the Old Testament prophets it was made plain that not all people in the nation of Israel were believers. Rarely in the nation’s history, as you read the records in the books of Kings and Chronicles, does it appear likely that a majority of the nation were genuinely believers. The criticism that the modern State of Israel has a high proportion of secular Jews who do not practice their faith is probably true, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that this is a new development compared to the level of religious practice in Israel’s history prior to Paul’s day. In the United Kingdom there was a debate in the media earlier this year about whether Britain is or is not a Christian country –in response to the affirmative claims of the Prime Minister David Cameron. By the measure of regular church attendance Sunday by Sunday, since people gained the choice and in particular since regular record-keeping began two centuries ago, there have never been an absolute majority of the population committed to active church membership manifested by the measurable data from church attendance. It is true that the current figures are less than half what they were in the 1960s, but no-one that I am aware of ever assumed that the vast majority of the population then and now openly professed faith in God as we do. Paul’s point is that God’s Word has not failed because both Jews and Gentiles year by year profess faith and will be saved. The proportions vary as do the absolute numbers of professions of faith, but what is declared in God’s Word is what happens regarding salvation, believing Jews and believing Gentiles do come to faith in the living God. Keep on praying for even more conversions amongst them! The visible implications of the prior call of God are seen in those who come to faith in the Lord. Therefore, we can be encouraged that God is at work in the world and amongst His people as He has promised us.

3. Jews who disbelieve are responsible for their choice (Romans 9:30-10:21)

Paul has made very plain in Romans 4 who are entitled to consider themselves in the covenant community of God’s people. Romans 4:16 states: *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – **not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham.** He is the father of us all.* As a result each person Jew or Gentile like us has a responsibility to respond to the good news of the Gospel in order to receive its benefits for ourselves. The people of Moses’ day might hear the Law of God read out but did that save them? No! In Romans 10:5 Paul makes this point using some words from Moses: *Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: **‘The person who does these things will live by them-*** a reference back to Leviticus 18:5, a passage concerned with lifestyle choices. This is no different to us today. We have to make a personal response to the claims of Jesus on our lives. Romans 10 is particularly strong on this point. *If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and **it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.** ¹¹ As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame.’ ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and **richly blesses all who call on Him,** ¹³ for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of*

the Lord will be saved' (Romans 10:9-13). Paul makes it very plain that if a significant proportion of Jews choose not to have faith and God and live a life consistent with that faith then they are responsible for that decision not God. It is exactly the same today with people in our country; we are rightly disappointed that at a time when the absolute numbers and proportion of the world's population that are Christians has never been higher, that this good news is not reflected in the data from our own country. Who is responsible for that? Each person is responsible for themselves –God has not failed in any way!

4. **There are Jews like Paul who are believers** (Romans 11:1)

Human beings appear to fall into two categories –the optimists and the pessimists; we tend to express as those who believe a glass is 'half-full' and others who declare that it is 'half-empty'. It is all a matter of perspective! It appears that the negative mindset was becoming more evident in the churches Paul knew for the reasons we have already identified. However, he seeks to stir them up to see that a more positive outlook would be wiser. *I ask then: did God reject His people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.* There may not be many but don't take this view further and assume there will not be any coming to faith in Christ. In the Western world, for example, there are very few converts from Islam to Christianity from some of the largest Muslim-majority people groups; however, there are some good encouragements. There has never been such an influx of Iranians coming to faith in Christ than in the years since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In history in every mission field there are times when the number of professions of faith are few despite the most enthusiastic and appropriate forms of witness being carried out; by contrast there are seasons of great numbers coming to faith in Christ that far exceeds the expectation of those involved in that evangelistic work. Paul wants us to remember that whether we are thinking of Jews or Gentiles there are always some who are coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you need to be encouraged to recognise this fact today? Remember that the most effective form of witness is our testimony of what God has done in our lives. Paul never ceased to share his conversion story. My old pastor whom I remember clearly from my teenage years on countless occasions referred to that moment when God became powerfully real as he knelt on a large sum of money in the strong room of a branch of the Midland Bank in Southend-on-Sea, three-quarters of a century ago! God is at work in you and me! He is also at work in other people's lives even if we cannot see it.

5. **A minority of Jews have always been believers** (Romans 11:2-10)

God did not reject His people, whom He foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah – how he appealed to God against Israel: ³ 'Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me'? ⁴ And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for Myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' ⁵ ***So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace*** (Romans 11:2-5). God 's promises for Israel have not failed because a minority of Jewish people have always been believers down the centuries; there are times when it looks like there are hardly any left but that is a false perception of reality. It is not an accurate picture of what is going on. The prime illustration of this for Paul comes from the perception of reality held by Elijah the courageous prophet whose inspirational example of courage in the face of adversity resonated down the centuries. In the reign of King Ahab of Israel and his evil Queen Jezebel the social and physical pressure to conform to the worship of the Canaanite gods whom Jezebel had grown up worshipping in Lebanon where her father Ethbaal was king was immense. The author of I

Kings wrote this summary of life in Israel at this time. ³⁰ *Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.* ³¹ *He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him.* ³² *He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria.* ³³ *Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him (I Kings 16:30-33).* Open displays of loyalty to the God of Israel would swiftly have led to the execution of the individual or family taking such a stance, just as an open display of Christian faith in Communist North Korea or in the Sunni Muslim State of Saudi Arabia would do so today for citizens of those countries. As a result believers were extremely discrete about their faith making it very difficult for other people to spot where their allegiances lay. Under the severe pressures he faced living life on the run Elijah succumbed to the melancholy belief that he was the only faithful Jewish believer left. In his cave to which he had fled in the Judean wilderness he poured out his heart to God. I Kings 19:10 states: *I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.* In fairness to Elijah he might have meant the only religious leader of the Jewish faith that had survived the slaughter instigated by Jezebel. Yet he was wrong there, after all Obadiah the royal official and devoted believer had protected one hundred of Elijah's colleagues. I Kings 18:13 records Obadiah's words: *Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the Lord? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water.* So Elijah was wrong which ever way his words are interpreted. In fact God informed Elijah that there were seven thousand Israelites who had remained resolute in their faith (I Kings 19:18). You may be a young person at school or university who may be the only Christian in your class or you may be the only Christian in your family or workplace and it feels a lonely place at times. Paul wants to encourage men and women in this position to be assured you are not alone. There may not be a vast number of believers in this district, but it is a greater number than you are aware of. Our perception of reality is very subjective affected by so many things including both our physical and mental health condition. God keeps His promises now as He has kept them in the past. He will never let you down –be assured of that.

6. The salvation of Gentiles will lead in time to Jews coming to faith (Romans 11:11-24)

Romans 11:11-12 says this: *Again I ask: did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.* ¹² *But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!* God had given Abraham and his descendants the responsibility for taking the good news of God to the nations. They did not take this task seriously wanting to keep it to themselves. If a Gentile asked to join them then most would accept the new convert, but there was no intentionality about witnessing or spreading their faith. Isaiah 28:11 records a prophetic judgement on the Jewish people that when God changes His means of spreading the good news that it would be noted in Jerusalem by people praising God in unfamiliar foreign languages. *Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people...(Isaiah 28:11).* On the Day of Pentecost, more than seven centuries later it was noted in Acts 2:5-8: *Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.* ⁶ *When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.* ⁷ *Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Does this mean then that God has finished completely with the Jewish*

people and their nation. Many Christians over the centuries have said ‘yes’ and used their perspective as a justification for anti-Semitic persecution of the Jews; many others have said ‘yes’ here without any anti-Semitic overtones or activities it must also be stated, but Paul has a different point to make here. The apostle is actually giving a warning to us as Gentile Christians not to presume that we can live as we like and not face consequences. Romans 11:17-21 reminds us of this key point: ¹⁷ *If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,* ¹⁸ *do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: you do not support the root, but the root supports you.* ¹⁹ *You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’* ²⁰ *Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble.* ²¹ *For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.* If God because of Jewish unbelief gave the Christian Church the lead role in World Evangelisation then apostasy in our ranks could lead equally to the loss of our privileged position as believers.

However, Paul goes on to say something that appeared for centuries to be most unlikely to happen, that is a turning again to their Messiah by significant numbers of Jewish people. Yet in the late nineteenth century onwards the handfuls of Messianic Jewish believers became a trickle and then even more as the twentieth century progressed. I think it is accurate that when the State of Israel was founded again in 1948 there was only a tiny number of Jewish believers in Jesus in the land whereas today that number might be approaching 20,000 people in up to 150 congregations with approximately 300,000 Jewish believers in Jesus worldwide [A compilation of statistics from different organisations is found on the ‘Jewish Israel’ website accessed May 2014]. God keeps His promises to His people.

7. All Israel will be saved because God keeps His promises to the Nation of Israel

(Romans 11:25-32)

Romans 11:25-26a states: ²⁵ *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in,* ²⁶ *and in this way **all Israel will be saved.*** I believe that this promise to the Israel is being fulfilled spiritually before our very eyes. This is indisputable. We rejoice in the success of appropriate evangelistic work amongst the Jewish people leading a growing number to faith in their (and our) Messiah the Lord Jesus Christ. However, I also believe that the restoration of blessings to Israel includes the nation of Israel being re-established in the land of Israel. Amos 9:15 records a prophetic statement from God: *I will plant Israel in their own land, **never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,***” says the Lord your God. Why is this important to God to make this point clear? Genesis 17:7-8, the promised to Abraham and his descendants regarding the land of Israel: *I will establish My covenant as **an everlasting covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* ⁸ *The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as **an everlasting possession** to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.* These words in Amos 9:11-15 have been spiritualised in more general terms of blessings to God’s people in the New Testament era in the writings of some Bible commentators, but the words of Scripture are to be taken at face value unless another Scripture points to a different kind of fulfilment or explanation. Christians do differ on this point and I accept that, but Paul insists and I trust we all can accept that God has kept His promises both to Israel and to us, Amen.