

COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 9

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THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD IN HIS DEALINGS WITH THE JEWS

We now begin our consideration of one of the most difficult sections of the Bible, Romans 9–11 (JC, II:23).

A. THE PRINCIPAL THEME OF THIS SECTION

As we read through these three chapters, a number of prominent themes leap to our attention.

a) *The Nation of Israel*. From beginning to end this section is dominated by references to ethnic or physical Israel (JC, II:23).

b) *God's Faithfulness*. Another subject introduced near the beginning of this section is the faithfulness of God, specifically, whether God has been faithful to his word concerning his people Israel (9:6a) (JC, II:23).

c) *The Remnant*. Another key subject is the distinction between Israel as a whole and remnant Israel. Membership in the former is determined by physical birth, but the latter is defined in spiritual terms as determined by God (JC, II:24).

d) *God's Sovereignty in Election*. "God's purpose in election" is another important theme (9:11), especially his sovereignty in making the choices that he does (JC, II:24).

e) *The Gentiles*. Paul also raises the question of the relation between the Jews and the Gentiles. God's elect, he says, are drawn "not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles" (9:24) (JC, II:24).

f) *Law and Grace*. We are not surprised that the main subject in chs. 1–8, law and grace, comes to the surface again in 9:30–31 as the key to the question of why God saves some and rejects others (JC, II:24).

g) *The Church*. A final theme, discussed in 11:17–24, is the church (JC, II:24). The specific issue in this section is the relation between the church and Israel.

Having surveyed the various topics that arise in this section, we may now ask which of them is the *main point* of 9–11 (JC, II:24).

1. INADEQUATE ANSWERS

Several inadequate possibilities have been suggested as the main theme of these chapters.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION

A common idea is that Paul's main point here is the sovereignty of God in his election of individuals to salvation. Some see 9–11 as the *locus classicus* (main proof text) for the Calvinist doctrine of predestination (JC, II:25).

This view must be rejected, however; neither election (predestination) as such nor God's sovereignty in election is the main point of 9–11. This conclusion has nothing to do with one's particular view of predestination, since scholars on both sides of this issue generally agree on this. While the subject of God's sovereignty in election is present in these chapters, it is not the main point (JC, II:25).

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Another view is that in 9–11 Paul is just continuing the theme of 1–8, that justification before God is by faith in the work of Jesus Christ, with a special emphasis on how this relates to Israel (JC, II:26).

Certainly the themes of law and grace are prominent in this section (JC, II:26). Nevertheless we must conclude that justification by faith is not the main point of 9–11. To be sure, the way the law-grace theme is presented in 1–8 indirectly leads to the question being dealt with here, as we shall presently see. But the main point is something else.

THE ROLE OF ISRAEL IN GOD'S PLAN

One other view, one that is quite common but still inadequate, is that Paul's purpose in writing 9–11 was to explain the role of the nation of Israel in God's redemptive plan (JC, II:26-27). Many interpreters think this section is mainly concerned with the question of Israel's salvation (JC, II:27). Others believe that Paul's main point is to explain the relation between Israel and the Gentiles (JC, II:27).

These chapters are obviously quite heavily focused on the nation of Israel. The Jews are involved in Paul's argument throughout the whole section. However, I disagree that Israel is the *main point* here, whether it be Israel and salvation, Israel and the Gentiles, Israel and the church, or national Israel and remnant Israel (JC, II:27).

2. THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The real focus of these chapters is not upon predestination as such, justification as such, or Israel as such. The focus is rather upon God himself (see Wright, *Climax*, 235). Specifically, the theme is *the faithfulness of God*. True, Israel figures heavily in this discussion. In fact, it is God's dealings with Israel that give rise to the question of his faithfulness. Has God kept his promises to them (9:6a) (JC, II:28)?

What, specifically, has raised this issue? Two things: The Jews' rejection of the gospel, and God's consequent rejection of the Jews. First, it was a simple historical fact that most of the nation of Israel did not accept Jesus as the expected Messiah; they rejected the gospel of grace (JC, II:28). Second, it was also a fact that God rejected his people (9:3), the nation of Israel as a whole, when they rejected him. That is, he rejected them with respect to salvation. This fact in particular raised the issue of God's faithfulness (JC, II:28-29).

Paul's intent in these chapters is to show that, in spite of the nation's unbelief and God's subsequent rejection of them, God has nevertheless been completely faithful to the Jews and has kept all his promises to them (9:6a) (JC, II:29-30).

B. PAUL'S ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

How then does Paul answer the question about God's faithfulness? The key to his answer is the distinction between service and salvation, with a corresponding distinction between utilitarian promises and redemptive promises. Being chosen for service is not the same as being chosen for salvation, and promises concerning the former do not necessarily entail promises concerning the latter. Thus it was concerning Israel: when God chose the Jewish nation to play a part in his great drama of redemption, he did not thereby guarantee the salvation of every individual Jew.

1. CHOSEN FOR SERVICE

God did indeed choose Israel for a special role of unmatched service, which Paul spells out in detail in 9:4-5 (see 3:1-2). Their mission was filled with wonder and glory, leading up to the grand climax of bringing into the world the Messiah, the Savior of mankind. One cannot imagine a greater privilege.

The fact is, despite all her shortcomings, Israel did indeed accomplish this mission. Nursed along by God's patient and chastising hand, Israel at last yielded the Messiah. This is something in which every individual Jew can take pride (JC, II:31). This, along with all the preparatory glories mentioned in 9:4-5, are privileges that will always belong to Israel and to Israel alone. These unique blessings have not been taken away from the elect nation, nor are they shared with anyone else, not even the church.

Israel rendered to God and to the rest of the world the greatest possible service. But it was *service* nonetheless, and service is the *only* thing for which the Jews as a nation were elected or chosen. That God chose them to serve in even this exalted way did not include and was not even directly related to their salvation. Personal salvation — justification by faith — was never intended for nor guaranteed to any individual Jew just because he was a Jew (see Piper, *Justification*, 218) (JC, II:31).

Thus Israel's rejection of salvation in no way implies that God's plan for the Jews *as a nation* was a failure. The problem or challenge concerning God's faithfulness arises only when one misunderstands God's intended role for the Jews in the first place. This was in fact a major mistake that the Jews themselves had made. They assumed that their

election for service automatically involved salvation; but this was never the point, as Paul has already shown in 2:1–3:8 (JC, II:32).

Paul's discussion in ch. 9 (vv. 1-29) presupposes that God has the perfect right to make this distinction between service and salvation. One might think (as did the Jews) that God surely cannot deny salvation to the people whom he loved and whom he chose and whom he used in such a marvelous way. Somehow this would just not seem fair! But that is the very point: it *is* fair; it *is* righteous for God to do this. He has the perfect right to make such a distinction, and to keep his choice for service completely separate from his choice for salvation. The fact that God used Pharaoh for his redemptive purposes did not require the latter to be saved (9:17-18). The same is true of Israel. If God wants to use the Jews in his service yet deny them salvation because of their unbelief, that is perfectly consistent with his nature and his promises. God is completely within his rights when he does this (9:19-21).

2. CHOSEN FOR SALVATION

But what about the salvation of the Jews? If they are not necessarily saved, are they then necessarily condemned? Are they totally cut off from Jesus and from his saving grace? No, they are neither automatically included, nor are they automatically excluded from grace. The point is simply that the salvation of any individual Jew — and salvation is open to them all — is an issue that is separate from the nation's election to service. God in his sovereignty has set up a way of salvation according to his own choosing, and he has sovereignly established the conditions under which anyone may receive this salvation, whether Jew or Gentile. Any individual Jew is free to meet these conditions and to accept this salvation.

This way of salvation, of course, is the same that Paul has expounded throughout 1–8: grace, not law; and the means by which any Jew may receive it is just as Paul has explained in these earlier chapters: faith in God's promises concerning the death and resurrection of Christ. See 9:30–10:21.

It is true that most Jews are not saved (9:1-3), but the reason is that they are trying to be saved by a way of their own choosing rather than the way of God's choosing, i.e., by law and not by grace (9:30–10:3) (JC, II:33).

Have any Jews actually believed and been saved? Of course they have! These are the "remnant" (9:27; 11:5) and the "descendants" (9:29, lit. "seed") of which Isaiah spoke. They are the seven thousand who did not bow to Baal (11:4). Though they be relatively few compared with the total number of ethnic Jews, they were the true Israel (9:6b) in OT times; and they along with believing Gentiles are in NT times the new Israel, the church (9:23-29). This way of salvation is still open to any and all Jews (11:17-24) (JC, II:33). The way of salvation for individual Jews is the same as for anyone else: grace, not law (JC, II:33). In this way it is possible for all Jews to be saved.

C. THE RELATION BETWEEN 1–8 AND 9–11

Another introductory issue is the relation between 9–11 and the first eight chapters of Romans. How is this section related to Paul's overall argument thus far? What is the flow of his thought here? Is there a logical connection between 9–11 and 1–8?

1. AVOIDING EXTREMES

In answering this question two extremes must be avoided. One is the view that there is no inherent connection, i.e., that chs. 9–11 are a kind of digression or parenthesis, or an appendix only loosely related to what has gone before (JC, II:34).

At the other extreme is the view that 9–11 is not just inherently related to 1–8 but is the logical climax to the argument being developed there. Viewed this way, 9–11 is then regarded as the heart and essence of the entire letter (JC, II:34-35).

Neither of these extremes is acceptable. On the one hand, chs. 1–8 do form a logically complete unit, to which 8:31-39 is a natural climax. These chapters deal with the question of personal salvation, affirming it to be by grace and not by law. But on the other hand, looking at it this way does not require us to regard 9–11 as a mere "aside or appendix, dealing with a different problem" (JC, II:35, n. 6). A more moderate view will now be explained.

2. THE NATURE OF THE CONNECTION

What has happened in the writing of Romans is this. Throughout Paul's explanation of how we are saved by grace and not by law (1–8), a question comes repeatedly to the surface but is not dealt with in detail lest the flow of the argument be too greatly interrupted. But once the main argument has been completed, it becomes possible, even necessary, to return to this question and to address it more specifically and completely, which is what Paul does in 9–11. Thus 9–11 definitely has a thematic connection with 1–8, though it is not a part of the logical flow of the latter. It *is* a separate unit. The point of 1–8 would stand without 9–11, and we could understand the main point of 9–11 without 1–8. But we would not know *why* Paul wrote these three chapters without referring back to 1–8.

To be specific, the very point of the first eight chapters — that salvation is by grace and not by law — seems in itself to render the Jews irrelevant, to render God's 2000 years of dealing with them futile and pointless, and definitely to raise the question of God's faithfulness to them.

The argument of 1–8 is that one is saved not by his response to any law code, including the Law of Moses, but only by the grace of God made available to all through the saving work of Jesus Christ (see 3:28; 6:14). But since the Jews are so closely identified with law (in the form of the Law of Moses), and since the way of grace appears to some to disparage or even dismiss the law, the gospel thus appears to be dismissing the Jews from God's plan as well. What then has become of God's promises to the Jews and of God's faithfulness to his promises?

This problem is compounded by the many positive references to the Jews and to the OT in 1–8 (JC, II:36). But all of these positive things about the Jews and about law seem to be overshadowed and negated by statements of another kind and by the general contrast with grace. This is especially true in the thematic statements, that we are justified by faith not by works of law (3:28), and that we are not under law but under grace (6:14) (JC, II:36).

The fact that the Jews and the law seem to be cast in such a negative light is what raises the question with which 9–11 deals. The message of grace in effect seems to make the 2000 years of Jewish history superfluous. Why did God focus his loving attention upon the Jews, and shower so many privileges upon them, if in the final analysis we are saved by grace, not by law (JC, II:36-37)?

Especially troublesome is the simple fact that most Jews rejected the grace of God and even their Messiah when he came. But if the gospel is so rooted in the OT, why did the Jews refuse it (JC, II:37)?

These are the sorts of questions that are left hanging in 1–8, and which Paul's discussion of God's faithfulness to the Jews in 9–11 is intended to answer (JC, II:37).

3. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXTUAL CONNECTION: 8:31-39

There is another reason why it is appropriate if not necessary for Paul to defend God's faithfulness at this point in his letter to the Romans. He has just concluded his explanation of the gospel of grace with one of the greatest hymns of hope in the human language, 8:31-39. In this paragraph the Apostle sets forth the precious promises that are the essence of God's new covenant through Jesus Christ.

After reading these promises, however, some may be tempted to ask whether they are as wonderful as they seem to be at first glance (JC, II:38). As some may see it, the problem is whether or not we can truly count on God to keep all these promises! In other words, will he be *faithful*?

Why should anyone raise such a question? Why should anyone dare to challenge the faithfulness of God? Here is where the question of Israel may possibly be raised. Someone may well ask, Did not God make equally great promises to the Jews under the Old Covenant (JC, II:38)? So why should we count on him to keep all these high-sounding promises to us under the New Covenant? If his word has failed for the Jews, will it also fail for us Christians? (See JC, II:38-39 & n 7.)

D. THE QUESTION OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN ELECTION

A final issue that must be briefly discussed in this introduction is the question of God's sovereign election as it relates to human responsibility and free will (JC, II:39). Though predestination is not the main point of this section of Romans, the subject does figure prominently here, especially in ch. 9. Thus some preliminary remarks are in order before we turn to a detailed examination of the text.

The fact is that there are several key affirmations of God's sovereignty in this section. See especially 9:7, 11-13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19-21, 22-23, 24; 11:7-8, 28, 29. These affirmations of God's sovereign election seem to be overwhelming, but at the same time there is considerable emphasis on human freedom and man's responsibility for his own fate. See for example 9:30-32, 33; 10:3, 4, 9-10, 12-13, 17, 21; 11:14, 20, 22, 23 (JC, II:39-40).

How are we to assess these data? How may we harmonize the references to divine sovereignty on the one hand, with the references to human beings' responsibility for their own fate on the other hand? Some see the answer in the distinction between the election of groups and the election of individuals. It is often argued (by Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike) that the main point in ch. 9 is corporate election, especially the election of Israel as a nation (JC, II:40). On the other hand, many deny that the main point is corporate election and argue instead that it is individual election Paul has in mind (JC, II:40-41 & n. 8).

What should we say about this? Surely, in our exegesis of 9-11 it is important to ask whether Paul is dealing with groups or with individuals. But actually this is not the key issue, and to approach this passage as if it were may cause us to miss its whole point. The key issue is the distinction between election for *salvation* and election for *service* (JC, II:41, n. 9). Also significant is the distinction between physical or ethnic Jews — the *nation* of Israel, and those who are Jews spiritually — those described as the *remnant* (9:27; 11:5). Paul's main point, though, is the difference between service and salvation, and whether these refer to individuals or groups in the final analysis will not affect the main point.

One point on which almost everyone agrees is that, somewhere in Rom 9, Paul deals at least in part with God's election of Israel as a nation for a role of service, or what Moo calls "this general (and nonsalvific) corporate election of Israel" (559, n. 24). But the problem, the point at issue, is this: exactly *with what* is this corporate election for service being compared or contrasted? Some say the contrast is with election of individuals to salvation, and that this is really the main point of Rom 9. Others say the contrast is with salvific corporate election, with the election of a *group*, not individuals, to salvation (JC, II:41, n. 10).

Which of these approaches is correct? In my judgment, neither of them. Does this mean that Paul is not concerned here with election to salvation at all? On the contrary, he is very much concerned with it *as a fact*, but especially in ch. 9 he is *not* concerned with any *details* relating to it. Again, the main point is the simple distinction between salvation and service. This is a distinction which the Jews themselves failed to make, and this very failure was the basis for questioning the faithfulness of God. "If God has chosen us, why is he now rejecting us and not saving us?" Because, says Paul, he did not choose you for salvation, but for service.

Election to service applies to the entire nation of Israel, and to every individual within it. Election to salvation applies only to the "Israel within Israel" — the remnant — and to every individual within it. Whether it be nations (groups) or individuals is not the point. This is contrary to the common Calvinist view, which tries to find individual election to salvation in this passage; it is also contrary to the view that salvific election is of groups, not individuals. The simple fact is that in Rom 9 it is not Paul's purpose to explain election to salvation at all.

Paul's discussion of Israel in Rom 9 in fact shows that God has the sovereign right to distinguish between salvation and service. The emphasis is on God's sovereign authority to choose unconditionally any group or any individual to fill any given role in the working out of his purposes, without being bound at the same time to guarantee their salvation. In this way God selected Israel from all the nations of the earth to perform the greatest act of service possible for an earthly agent.

At the same time God is sovereignly free to choose individuals for salvation in a way that is completely different from the way he chooses anyone for service. The fact is that he chooses to bestow salvation on the basis of grace and upon the primary condition of faith. This conditional election to salvation is established in 9:30-10:21. Certainly those unconditionally chosen for service can also be saved, but 9:30-10:21 shows that salvation is given only to those who through faith choose to relate to God in terms of grace instead of law. Those who put their trust in God's way of grace form another group within and distinct from ethnic Israel, namely, spiritual Israel, the remnant of believers.

This resolves the seeming paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in 9-11. Many interpreters, especially Calvinists, are content to regard the presence of these two themes as a paradox, but this is totally unnecessary. God's sovereignty is exercised in his unconditional election of individuals and groups, Israel in particular, to roles of service in the working out of his redemptive plan. His sovereignty is also seen in the way he chooses to distinguish service from salvation, which allows him to choose and use Israel without guaranteeing the salvation of all individual Jews as part of the same package. Another expression of his sovereignty is his right to establish the system of salvation according to a way of his own choosing, in a way independent of works, namely, by grace. Those who accept this way to salvation become part of "the elect."

But it is made very clear from 9:30 onward that becoming a part of this grace category is the result of one's responsible choice to believe God's promises. In other words, salvation is *conditional*. This in no way contradicts the sovereignty of God, but rather upholds it, since it is perfectly consistent with the way God made human beings and configured his way of salvation in the first place.

E. AN OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS 9–11

Romans 9–11 is divided into three main sections. After a prologue (9:1-5) that sets up the problem to be discussed, the first main section (9:1-29) discusses the fact that God has made a *distinction* within the nation of Israel so that there are in fact two Israels: (1) physical, ethnic, or national Israel, i.e., Israel according to flesh; and (2) remnant or spiritual Israel, i.e., Israel according to faith. The former was chosen for service, the latter for salvation. The second main section (9:30–10:21) explains the *criterion* for distinguishing between the two Israels, i.e., the choice between law and grace. The third section (11:1-32) shows that there is still *hope* for the salvation of all ethnic Jews. The passage closes with a doxology of praise to God (11:33-36).

I. THE PROBLEM OF ISRAEL: THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF THE JEWISH NATION (9:1-5)

The transition from ch. 8 to ch. 9 is quite abrupt. No connecting word (e.g., “therefore,” “however”) links 9:1 closely with 8:39. There is an obvious shift in subject matter. Also, the tone changes dramatically. The spirit of joy and confidence characterizing the end of ch. 8 is replaced by a spirit of tension and sorrow.

The reason for this new direction in Paul's thought is the problem of his own kinsmen, the Jewish people. In view of the Jews' privileged role in God's plan, the logical expectation would be that they above all others should have been rejoicing in the hope Paul describes in 8:31-39. The shocking and tragic fact, though, was that most Israelites were rejecting the Messiah whose coming was their very reason for being. As a result, rather than celebrating their salvation, they were under God's curse.

Paul's reaction to the plight of the Jews took two forms. On a subjective, personal level his heart was filled with grief because of their lost state. On a more objective, theological level he was concerned that some might take Israel's rejection as an indication that God's word had failed. Though his personal grief was genuine, his greater concern was to show that the tragedy of the Jews in no way violated God's original promises and plans for them as a nation.

The main point of this section (9:1-5) is to set forth the contrast between the plight of Israel (1–3) and her privileges (4–5). How can these be reconciled? Has God's word somehow failed to come true? By raising these questions Paul thus prepares the way for his defense of the faithfulness of God in his dealings with his people.

A. ISRAEL'S AGONY: THEY ARE ACCURSED (9:1-3)

9:1 I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit — With these introductory words Paul affirms in several ways the truthfulness of what he is about to say in vv. 2-3. In the Greek text of his positive statement, the word “truth” stands first, in the place of emphasis: “*Truth* I speak in Christ!” This point is reemphasized by saying the same thing negatively, “I am not lying.”

To further confirm the veracity of his words, Paul invokes three distinct witnesses. One is his own conscience (see 2:15), which, he says, testifies or bears witness along with him. (“Testifies along with me” or “bears witness along with me” is a literal translation and is to be preferred over the NIV's “confirms it.”) (See JC, II:45, n. 11.) In other words Paul has no inward reservations at all about what he is saying.

The other two witnesses are Christ and the Holy Spirit. Paul says he speaks the truth “in Christ.” This could mean simply that he speaks as one who is conscious of being in union with Jesus Christ, and who thus as a Christian is always bound to speak the truth (see Moo, 555; Cranfield, 2:452). I believe, though, in view of the parallel idea in 1 Tim 2:7, that he is referring to his appointment by Christ to be an apostle; and thus “in Christ” is an invocation of his apostolic authority (see Dunn, 2:523).

Similarly “in the Holy Spirit” could be referring to the indwelling Holy Spirit, through whose moral power every Christian can resist the temptation to lie (see 8:13). More likely, though, Paul is here referring to his consciousness of the fact that he is writing under the inspiration of the Spirit and is thus divinely prevented from speaking falsehood (see 1 Cor 7:40).

Seldom does Paul go to such lengths to reinforce the truthfulness of his assertions. Of course this does not mean that on other occasions he is not telling the truth. This is simply his way of underscoring the seriousness of what he is saying (JC, II:45-46).

9:2 Exactly what is the momentous truth solemnly introduced in v. 1? Strictly speaking, it is the fact that Paul is personally filled with tremendous grief and anguish: **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.** The cause of his grief is not actually stated in this verse, but is made clear in v. 3. It is the fact that his own natural kinsmen, the Jewish people, were under God’s curse because of their unbelief.

The words “sorrow” and “anguish” refer to the emotional state of his heart, and their intensity is magnified by the adjectives “great” and “unceasing.” Would Paul’s spirit be filled with such deep suffering if he thought for a moment that the Jews as such were saved (JC, II:46)?

Why did Paul think it was so important to state this fact in such an emphatic way? Primarily to establish his authenticity; it shows that his negative judgment against his countrymen is not just the result of some personal spite against them, but is the true word of God, a word that afflicted him so deeply that he would give anything if it were not true (JC, II:46).

9:3 Just how deep are Paul’s feelings for his fellow Jews? Just how far would he go to save them? This verse tells us: **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, . . .**

Exactly what was Paul willing to endure on behalf of his brethren? To be “cursed and cut off from Christ.” The word “cursed” translates *ajnavqema* (*anathema*), used in other places for eternal condemnation (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9) (JC, II:47). There is no word for “cut off” in the Greek text. Literally it reads “accursed from Christ” (see 2 Thess 1:7-10). Most agree that this is a strong and clear reference to condemnation in hell (Lard, 294; MP, 377; Moo, 557) (JC, II:47, n. 12).

The verb translated “I could wish” is difficult, not in itself but in view of what Paul was wishing. This word (*eu[comai, euchomai*) can mean either “to pray” or “to wish”; either meaning conveys the notion of a sincere desire. The content of Paul’s desire is that he himself might be sent to hell in the place of his fellow Jews.

The straightforward meaning of the verb is “I was praying (wishing),” or “I used to pray (wish);” but a past tense does not fit the context. Thus most agree that it should be treated as a “potential imperfect” (Nash, “Critique,” 31) (JC, II:47). In other words, “I *would* pray or wish this *if* it could be done, but I know it cannot” (JC, II:47, n. 13).

But why is such a thing impossible? The Calvinist answer is that this would contradict the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or “once saved, always saved” (JC, II:47, n. 14). The more obvious answer, though, is that Paul knew that he as a sinful human being could not be an adequate substitute for even one other sinner, much less for the whole nation of Israel. Paul’s words, “for the sake of my brothers,” are the language of substitution (compare 6:6,8; see Moo, 559). But only the divine and sinless Messiah could be and was such a substitute (Gal 3:13).

Two things are unequivocally demonstrated by this statement: first, the reality of Paul’s concern for his people, and the depth of his grief at their lost condition (JC, II:48, n. 15). “Paul felt such love that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation and spend eternity in hell if somehow that could bring his fellow Jews to faith in Christ!” (MacArthur, 2:11) (JC, II:48). Second is that Israel as a nation, i.e., the majority of the Jews, were in fact lost. The language “accursed from Christ” certainly refers to eternal lostness, and Paul’s willingness to endure this state in Israel’s place without a doubt implies that Israel herself was under such a curse (see Moo, 557-558; Piper, *Justification*, 45) (JC, II:48).

There is no question that Paul’s concern is directed toward the nation of Israel. He calls them “my brothers, those of my own race” (JC, II:48). Contrary to some interpretations, Paul does not imply that they are saved when he speaks of them as “brothers” (JC, II:48-49). In order to make it clear that he is talking here only about physical kinship, Paul adds “those of my own race,” literally, “my kinsmen (relatives) according to the flesh.” No salvation is implied. In fact, one of Paul’s main points in this very chapter is that membership in physical Israel is not equivalent to membership in the true spiritual people of God (9:6; see ch. 2) (JC, II:48-49).

B. ISRAEL'S ECSTASY: THEY ARE RECIPIENTS OF UNSPEAKABLY GLORIOUS PRIVILEGES (9:4-5)

Paul now turns to the other side of the paradox called Israel. The same nation which is the object of God's curse is the one that God chose to receive some of the greatest blessings imaginable. These next two verses give a list of these privileges, a project begun in 3:1-2 and now continued in detail (JC, II:49).

One very important question regarding these privileges is whether they were related only to pre-Christian Israel, or whether they continue to apply to Jews in the Christian era and beyond (JC, II:49-50). It is true that everything in this list of blessings pointed beyond the OT era to this age and beyond, as did Israel's very existence. The single purpose of Israel's election, and of all the preliminary privileges listed in 3:2 and 9:4-5a, is the climactic privilege named in 9:5b, i.e., the first coming of Christ. By serving God's purpose of bringing the Christ into the world, all of these prerogatives have played a preparatory role in the eternal salvation of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles. And every ethnic Jew who ever lived and will live, whether saved or not, has a right to look at this list and take humble and grateful pride in the fact that God chose *his* nation to be the recipients of these blessings and thereby to prepare for the Christ and his saving work (JC, II:50).

It is one thing to receive the intended *result* of these privileges, as does every saved person; it is quite another to receive the privileges themselves, which was true *only* of the nation of Israel (including every individual within it) up to the time of Christ's first coming. Here Paul is talking only about the latter circumstance. He is referring only to the privileges God bestowed upon the Jewish nation in the OT era, privileges that applied in that day to every Jew whether he was part of the saved remnant or not. But they no longer apply in any direct sense to *anyone*: not to Jews as Jews, whether individually or collectively; not to Gentiles as such; and not to Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles.

Herein lies the nature of the tragic irony of Israel's existence. They were so absorbed with the privileges themselves (and continued to be, in Paul's day), that they neglected and even rejected the intended result of these privileges, God's gracious salvation through Christ. They glorified the means, and ignored the end. The very people who were, by God's gracious choice, responsible for bringing the Redeemer into the world were themselves the object of his wrath.

9:4 At the beginning of v. 4 Paul refers to his brothers and kinsmen (v. 3) as **the people of Israel**. This may be in apposition to "brothers" and "kinsmen," bringing the thought of v. 3 to an end (as in the NIV). Or it may be the first item in the list of the privileges themselves, as the verse division suggests. I prefer the latter view, though this is not a serious issue (JC, II:51).

Taking these words as the first blessing, we find a total of nine privileges bestowed upon the chosen people (JC, II:51 & n. 16). Schematically the list looks like this:

- . . . my brothers and kinsmen —
 - who are Israelites (a better translation than the NIV);
 - of whom [are] adoption, glory, covenants, law, worship, and promises;
 - of whom [are] the fathers; and
 - from whom [is] the Christ.

The first privilege of the Jews, says Paul, is that they are *Israelites* (JC, II:51). This seems to point back to the time of Israel's calling, to the period of their very formation as a people from the loins of Jacob, whom God renamed "Israel" (Gen 32:28). It is in itself a title of honor that embodies the totality of their God-given privileges (JC, II:52).

Theirs is the adoption as sons Literally it says, "of whom is the adoption" (JC, II:51). Contrary to some interpretations, Paul is not talking primarily about individual Jews but about the nation as a whole. The term refers to God's sovereign choice of Israel collectively to be his son (See Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1). In a derivative sense each individual born as a Jew enjoyed this status of adoptive sonship (see Deut 14:1; 32:19; Isa 1:2; 43:6) (JC, II:52).

This concept of Israel's adoption emphasizes God's initiative and deliberate choice in establishing this relationship with Israel (JC, II:52). Also, it indicates that God's relation with his people was one of fatherly affection (Deut 1:31; 8:5; Isa 46:3-4; Jer 3:19).

Though this adoption was extremely significant, its limitations must still be recognized. For one thing, it did not in itself entail the salvation (spiritual sonship) of any individual Jew. (See Lard, 294-295; Moo, 562; MacArthur, 2:13.) Also, this father-son relation with Israel as a nation ended with the beginning of the New Covenant, under which adoption is now a saving relationship with all willing individuals, including both Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3:26-4:7).

[T]heirs is the divine glory . . . (literally, "and the glory"). "The glory" refers to the fact that God manifested himself to OT Israel and even dwelt among them in a glorious visible form (a theophany) (JC, II:53). Later Judaism began to use

the Hebrew term *shekinah* to refer to this glorious manifestation of God's presence. *Shekinah* means "dwelling" or "presence" (Cranfield, 2:462) and was thus a kind of shorthand for "the presence of God's glory." No wonder Paul included this in the list of Israel's privileges (JC, II:53)!

Today God is present in a special way within his church (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:22) and within individual Christians (1 Cor 6:19). Though this presence is not one of visible glory, it is even greater than the *shekinah* because it is part of our salvation.

The next privilege is **the covenants**. A major question is, why is this plural? (JC, II:54, n. 17). There are several possibilities. One is that Paul is speaking of the several *ratifications* of the Mosaic covenant. Another is that he is talking about all biblical covenants, including the New Covenant. To include the New Covenant, however, violates the intent of this list, which is to name those privileges which are exclusive to Israel. The third and most likely possibility is that "covenants" refers to all OT covenants specifically involving Israel. This would include the covenant with Abraham and the other patriarchs; the covenant at Sinai, as ratified at Moab and at Gerizim-Ebal; and the covenant with David (JC, II:54 & n. 18).

The main point is that Israel is the only nation on earth with whom God chose to enter a special covenant relationship. This is just one more indication of their status of exalted privilege.

The next blessing named by Paul is **the receiving of the law**. (See JC, II:54, n. 19.) This refers to the Law of Moses, and to the fact that being chosen to be the recipients of this law was an honor granted only to Israel. (See Ps 147:20.) (See JC, II:54.)

Israel was also granted the privilege of **the temple worship**. The NIV is probably correct to take it in the narrow sense of the temple services. This would include "the entire ceremonial system" of the Law of Moses (MacArthur, 2:15), and especially the system of sacrifices that dealt with sin and foreshadowed the Messiah's atoning work (JC, II:55).

The last privilege listed in v. 4 is **the promises**. This refers to all the promises included in God's covenants, as well as all the other promises made to Israel. This includes the promises given to the Jewish people generally (JC, II:55, n. 20), and the promises given to individuals (JC, II:55).

All such promises ultimately pointed toward a single goal, the coming of the Messiah. Their fulfillment was the means to this one end. They are like individual notes that lead into the great symphony of messianic promises and prophecies themselves (JC, II:55). What is important to see is that all these promises made to Israel were fulfilled when Jesus came the first time; see Acts 13:32-34. Rom 9:5b is the goal and climax of them all. The promises made to Abraham and to the rest were fulfilled *through* Israel, *in* Christ, *to* us. These promises no longer apply to Israel today nor to Christians as such. We are not under these promises, but rather under their fulfillment. The promises of the New Covenant are different, and better (Heb 8:6).

9:5 Theirs are the patriarchs, . . . (literally, "the fathers"; see 11:28; 15:8). This refers especially to the "founding fathers" of the Jewish people: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see 9:6-13; Exod 3:15). From the perspective of the Jews, the fact that God chose these men to be the foundation of his chosen people made them not only national heroes but also the greatest figures in the history of the world (Deut 7:6-8). It was certainly a great privilege to be able to claim them as ancestors.

This leads to the climactic and most wonderful privilege of all: **and from them [the Jews] is traced the human ancestry of Christ . . .** This is the blessing for which all the others were only means to an end, the one purpose for which the others existed in the first place, namely, to bring the Messiah, the Christ, into the world.

The emphasis here is on the human nature of Christ. The Greek text may be translated literally thus: "from whom is the Christ according to the flesh." Christ's saving work required that he have not only a divine nature but also a true and complete human nature.

The blessings mentioned earlier in the list are described as belonging to Israel: "theirs" (vv. 4a,5a), literally, "*of* whom." Here the expression changes to "*from* them." This shows that the relation between the Messiah and national Israel was one of origin or ancestry only. Jesus did not "belong" to Israel; he was not their Messiah in the sense of their personal Savior, since most Jews remained unbelievers (JC, II:56). The very people granted the prerogative of bringing the Christ into the world rejected him when he came. Their greatest privilege was the very obstacle over which they stumbled (JC, II:56-57).

This simple fact that *from Israel came the Christ* was the ultimate fulfillment of all God's promises to and covenants with the Jews as a nation. God's word thus did not fail, and his purpose for physical Israel was thus achieved.

The next clause — . . . **who is God over all, forever praised! Amen** — has been interpreted in two main ways. The basic question is whether the word "God" refers to Christ or not. If it does, this verse is one of the strongest NT affirmations of the divine nature of Jesus (JC, II:57, n. 22).

Those who deny that *theos* (God) refers to Christ insert a period somewhere in the middle of the verse, usually after the word “Christ.” Verse 5b then becomes a statement of praise to God that is separate from the statement about Christ. The RSV is a good example: From the Jews “according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever” (JC, II:57).

The other main possibility is to take the entire verse (after “the patriarchs”) as a single statement about the Christ, which thus would be affirming that he is *theos*, or God. The NIV is an example of this view (JC, II:51).

There are several arguments that favor the latter interpretation (JC, II:58, n. 24). Grammatically, the wording in v. 5b points in this direction (see JC, II:58). Paul’s pattern of usage elsewhere in doxologies and blessings is also a strong indicator (JC, II:58 & n. 25). Based on the grammar and word usage of Paul, if v. 5b were referring to God the Father and not to Jesus Christ, one would expect the wording to have been similar to the following: “Blessed be God, who is over all forever.”

Other arguments have to do with the context. The reference to Christ’s human nature in v. 5a calls for a complementary reference to his divine nature. Taking the latter part of the verse as a doxology seems out of place in a paragraph “otherwise expressing sorrow and regret” (Fitzmyer, 549). Taking v. 5b as affirming Christ’s deity is compatible with the climactic nature of this last and highest privilege bestowed upon Israel (JC, II:58).

Over against these arguments from wording and context it is argued that Paul nowhere else refers to Christ as *theos* (“God”). It is true that Paul’s usual title for Jesus is *kyrios* (“Lord”), and that *theos* is usually reserved for God the Father (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3-6; Eph 4:5-6; Phil 2:11). But Paul certainly attributes deity to Christ elsewhere (see Gal 1:1; Phil 2:6; Col 2:9), and a strong case can be made that he calls Jesus *theos* in Titus 2:13 and 2 Thess 1:12 (see Murray, 2:247-248). In addition, the title *kyrios* is itself a title of deity (see 1:4; 10:9-13) (JC, II:58).

Moo is therefore correct in concluding that Paul is calling Jesus *theos* in this verse. This view, he says, is “exegetically preferable, theologically unobjectionable, and contextually appropriate” (568).

The other descriptions of Christ in v. 5b are also indicative of his divine nature. He is the one who is “over all,” an expression of his universal Lordship (Acts 10:36), which belongs only to God. He is the “blessed” one (NIV, “praised”), a term which elsewhere in the NT refers only to God (Mark 14:61; Luke 1:68; Rom 1:25; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3). He is blessed “forever,” indicating his eternity (JC, II:59).

II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ETHNIC AND SPIRITUAL ISRAEL (9:6-29)

The main theme of 9–11 is God’s faithfulness in his dealings with Israel. The issue is summarized in 9:1-5 thus: in view of the privileges for which Israel was chosen (vv. 4-5), how is it possible for a faithful God to reject them and curse them (vv. 1-3)? Does this mean that God’s purpose for Israel has in fact failed? “Have not God’s promises to Israel ended in nothing as far as the Jews are concerned?” (Fitzmyer, 558).

Paul’s answer, of course, is that God’s purposes and promises have not failed (9:6a; see 3:4). The apparent paradox of 9:1-5 is easily resolved by seeing that there is not just one Israel, but two (9:6b), and by discerning the proper nature and purpose of each. National, ethnic, physical Israel was chosen by God to play a primary role in his plan of redemption. This entitled them to all the blessings of 9:4-5, but these blessings did not include the guarantee of personal salvation. Every covenant promise God made to Israel as a nation was completely fulfilled, irrespective of the salvation status of any individual Jew. God has the sovereign right to choose and use any individual or group in this manner. This is the point of 9:6-18.

Is it true, then, that every individual Israelite is actually lost? In 9:3 Paul implies that physical Israel, his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” are indeed “accursed” (NASB). But he does not say this applies to every Jew without exception. Yes, some (most) Jews are lost, but some are saved! Those who are saved are still part of national Israel and participate in all the covenant blessings bestowed upon the nation as a whole, but they constitute an “Israel” of a different sort, an “Israel within Israel,” one that is defined not just in terms of physical descent from Jacob but also in terms of a saving relationship with God. This is the point of Paul’s key statement in 9:6b, “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” God’s sovereign right to make this distinction within the larger body of ethnic Israel is the point of 9:19-29. He can use the entire nation for his redemptive purposes, while limiting salvation only to spiritual Israel, the remnant. “It is the remnant that will be saved” (9:27b, NASB).

It is extremely important to understand how the issue of salvation figures into the discussion in 9:6-29. Some points are accepted by almost everyone. It is agreed that *election* (choosing, making distinctions) is a key theme in this section. It is agreed that Paul is stressing God’s sovereign *freedom* to make distinctions and choices in whatever way he pleases (JC,

II:60, n. 26). It is also agreed that belonging to physical Israel was not in itself a guarantee of personal salvation (JC, II:60, n. 27).

But there is sharp disagreement, usually (but not always) along Calvinist vs. non-Calvinist lines, as to which parts of vv. 6-29 refer to God's election to *service*, and which refer to his election to *salvation*. This disagreement occurs in view of the fact that Calvinism generally teaches unconditional election to salvation, (JC, II:60, n. 28). and because (especially) vv. 7-23 seem to be affirming unconditional election. Thus it is quite common to see Calvinists use this passage as a proof text for the doctrine of the unconditional election of individuals to salvation (and usually, the unconditional reprobation of all others to hell) (JC, II:61).

Non-Calvinists of course disagree, and usually take one of two approaches to this passage. Some say the election described therein does have to do with individual salvation, but it is conditional rather than unconditional. Even though the conditions (such as faith) are not specifically named in the text itself, they are taken to be implicit in view of other biblical teaching. A common form of this view is that God made his choices, e.g., of Jacob over Esau, based on divine foreknowledge of the lives and character of each (JC, II:61).

Since the text itself does not mention foreknowledge and seems to exclude human conditions as such, others have taken the approach that Paul is here talking about unconditional election to *service*, not salvation (JC, II:61 & n. 31). In my judgment this is the correct view (JC, II:61-62). The following is a summary of the argument in 9:1-29.

First, Paul expresses his grief over the fact that most Jews are accursed — the very Jews who were chosen to receive the greatest of privileges (9:1-5). But how is this possible? Is this some kind of contradiction? Has God's word failed? No! God's purposes and promises have *not* failed (9:6a), basically because there are *two different kinds* of "Israel" (9:6b). One is national Israel, which was unconditionally chosen by God to be a party to the covenant made with the fathers, and thus to receive the blessings of 9:4-5. This was an election and a call to service only, and it was a matter of God's sovereign and unconditional choice with no requirement for saving faith on the part of any individual Israelite. Israel's founders were chosen apart from any decisions, qualifications, faith, or works on their part; and God kept his promises to the nation and carried out his purposes for them not because of their belief but in spite of their frequent unbelief (9:7-13).

The other Israel is composed of those individuals within the ethnic body which do in fact have a saving faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Salvation is promised and given not to the nation as a whole, but only to this *spiritual* Israel, which is in a sense the "true" Israel (see 2:28-29), the redeemed remnant. The fact that God has withheld salvation from the majority of Jews is not a violation of his covenant with them, for that covenant as such did not include a promise of automatic salvation based on ethnic heritage alone.

Paul's key point in v. 6b is in effect that God has *made a distinction* within the nation of Israel, using all Jews to serve his saving purpose but giving salvation only to some. This is his solution to the problem raised in vv. 1-5. But his following discussion shows that he anticipates that this solution to the original problem will itself be seen as a problem, namely, its fairness will be questioned (see v. 14). Does God have the *right* to make this kind of distinction within his chosen people, a distinction resulting in two kinds of Israel?

In defense of his statement in 9:6b and in anticipation of such an objection, in 9:7-13 Paul makes a point that no Jew can deny, namely, that in the very events that gave rise to the nation of Israel, God had already made some unconditional distinctions within the progeny of Abraham. These verses are not talking about the distinction within Israel as affirmed in v. 6b, which is a distinction between service and salvation. Rather they describe divine choices whereby some were chosen for service and others were passed by, choices by which Israel as a nation was created in the first place.

This has two applications. The first refers to the distinction specified in v. 6b. To those who might suggest that such a distinction is unfair, Paul is simply pointing out that making such distinctions is nothing new for God; he did this sort of thing in the very beginning when he brought Israel into existence. Granted, that was a matter of selecting certain individuals and a certain people for service rather than for salvation, but it set a precedent showing that God was not acting out of character or contrary to established patterns when he made the distinction between the two Israels as such.

The second application of 9:7-13 relates directly to the problem of Israel's lostness raised in vv. 1-5. The point is that this lostness does not negate God's promises because his original choice of the founders of Israel had nothing to do with their works, character, merits, faith, or salvation status in general. It was simply his sovereign will to use these individuals (Isaac and Jacob) rather than the alternatives (Ishmael and Esau), and the purpose for which he chose them was such that they did not have to be personally saved to carry it out. God could and did choose to use them just as they were. The same is true for the entire nation of Israel that sprang from their loins. God intended to use them for his service whether or not they believed and were saved. Thus there is no conflict between vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-5.

In 9:14-18 Paul specifically raises the problem of fairness that some are bound to see in such divine distinguishing. Doesn't it seem unjust for God to choose people for service in this way? Shouldn't individuals have the right to volunteer,

or at least consent to being thus used? And if they are going to be conscripted into service, as it were, shouldn't they at least be rewarded with salvation?

In response Paul simply *declares* that God has the right to choose whomever he wills to use for his purposes, whether they be saved or not. The subject is election for service, not salvation. The mercy and compassion of which Moses spoke is not saving grace, but God's selection and appointment of a person (or a nation) to have the privilege of serving him (see below). That such a person does not have to be saved to serve God's redemptive purposes is perfectly illustrated by Pharaoh, upon whom God had mercy by choosing him for a vital role in his plan, but who at the same time was hardened in order that he might fulfill that role. In like manner God chose the nation of Israel for his grand redemptive purpose, and he used them for it even though most individual Jews (like Pharaoh) were hardened.

In 9:19-29 Paul turns specifically to the original distinction set forth in 9:6b, the distinction between national Israel as a whole (used for service) and the spiritual Israel existing within it (blessed with salvation). Does God have a right to make this distinction? The objection is put into the mouths of those Israelites who are lost, as they try to blame God for their lost state (9:19). They say, if God is orchestrating this whole thing, how can he hold us responsible and condemn us for our unbelief? Hasn't God made us the way we are?

Paul's primary answer at this point is that the lost person (specifically, the unbelieving Jew) has no right to complain to God at all, since God is indeed the sovereign Lord who has by decree created this single "lump of clay" known as Israel (9:21). It is *his* plan and *his* clay, and he (like a potter) can do with it what he wills. Since it is his to begin with by right of creation (9:7-13), it is also his right to divide it as he chooses and to make different kinds of vessels from it. Some are vessels of wrath and are under the curse of v. 3; others are vessels of mercy and will be saved. These vessels of mercy are the remnant of which the prophets spoke, i.e., the true believers, or spiritual Israel, to which in this church age are added all true believers from among the Gentiles.

This main section comes to a close with this point, but in itself it does not resolve the issue of divine faithfulness raised in 9:1-5. It simply establishes the *fact* that God has made a distinction between the two Israels, only one of which is saved. It shows clearly that ethnic Israel's role of service had no essential connection with personal salvation. It also asserts God's sovereign right to make this distinction between the serving and the saved (9:19-29), but it does not go into detail as to the *nature* of such a distinction. In particular, this section does not raise the question as to the basis, or conditions, upon which God distinguishes the remnant from the larger group of Israelites according to the flesh.

Those of a Calvinist bent will insist that this is an improper question to begin with, since they are convinced that election to salvation is unconditional. But this conclusion is invalid in view of the fact that the language of unconditionality in 9:7-18 applies only to election to service. Election to salvation is a completely different issue. The divine distinguishing that separates the saved from the lost is conditioned upon the free human choice either to accept or to reject the saving promises of God. This is the point of the next main section, 9:30-10:21. Only when this point has been made is the issue of divine faithfulness regarding Israel completely resolved.

A. ISRAEL'S SITUATION AND GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (9:6-13)

It is clear that these verses deal with divine election, but election *to what* (JC, II:65)? The relevant choices are election to *service* and election to *salvation*. This distinction relates to the two Israels named in 9:6b: ethnic Israel, chosen for service; and spiritual Israel, chosen for salvation. But which of these two is the main subject of 9:6-13?

Many simply assume that spiritual Israel is the main subject, and that God's choice of Isaac and his choice of Jacob are prime examples of how God distinguishes the true spiritual Israel (the saved) from ethnic Israel as a whole (JC, II:65, n. 32). They argue that the terminology used in these verses can only be salvation language: seed or children of Abraham, children of God, children of promise, God's purpose, God's call as opposed to human works, God's love (JC, II:66, n. 33).

A brief reflection upon the individuals and incidents being discussed in these verses will show, however, that Paul is *not* talking about how God makes distinctions *within* Israel (between the ethnic and the spiritual, as in v. 6b), but how he established ethnic Israel in the first place. Ishmael and Isaac as a pair were not the original "ethnic Israel" from which God elected only Isaac to be the first member of "spiritual Israel." Ishmael was never a part of Israel in either sense; he was chosen neither for service nor for salvation (as far as we know). The same is true of the twins Esau and Jacob.

The point of these verses is that Isaac and Jacob were chosen to be the first representatives of *ethnic* Israel (after Abraham himself). Whether they were saved or not, i.e., whether they were also part of spiritual Israel, is not relevant. In

fact, the nonrelevance of their salvation status is the key to Paul's argument: Isaac and Jacob, like ethnic Israel as a whole, could be chosen and used for God's service whether they were saved or not (JC, II:66).

But what about the language used in this section? Is it not the language of salvation? This depends solely upon the context. In other NT contexts the terminology does refer to salvation and the saved, but it is not inherently limited to this. It is covenant language, to be sure, but covenant language is not always salvation language. A common error in modern theology is to erase the proper distinction between the Abrahamic covenant and the New Covenant, and to project the salvation content of the latter back into the former. This is common among Calvinists, and it is why someone such as Murray or Piper cannot separate the covenant realities of 9:4-5 from salvation, and why they cannot see anything but salvation in the language of 9:7-13.

The point of the Abrahamic covenant, though, was not the salvation of its recipients. Its point was rather that *through* Abraham and his (physical) seed the means by which all peoples could be saved would be brought into the world. This was a covenant of service; and the recipients of this covenant, i.e., ethnic Israel, were chosen to render this service and to experience its accompanying temporal privileges and rewards (vv. 4-5) (JC, II:67).

The language of 9:7-13 is perfectly consistent with the role played by ethnic Israel in God's plan. God had a definite purpose for choosing this nation (9:11), which he did by choosing its forefathers, Isaac and Jacob. He called them into his service without regard for any meritorious qualifications on their part and without even asking for their own conscious participation in the choice (9:11-12). It was all a matter of God's choice and promise, i.e., his covenant promise to bless and to use these individuals and their physical descendants for the purpose of bringing the Savior into the world. In this context "children of Abraham," "children of God," and "children of promise" (9:7-8) are perfectly consistent with God's purpose for ethnic Israel, and perfectly applicable to Isaac and Jacob and their natural descendants in contrast with Ishmael and Esau and their descendants. Isaac and Jacob were the progenitors not just of spiritual Israel, but of ethnic Israel as a whole.

Thus I agree with Lenski (597-598), that Isaac and Jacob are not types of election to salvation: "Paul's two illustrations have nothing to do with an eternal election or predestination of Isaac and of Jacob to salvation and with a reprobation of Ishmael and of Esau to damnation."

Shall we say, then, that 9:6-13 has no bearing at all upon the election of individuals to eternal salvation? Not necessarily. The error is to take the references to Isaac and Jacob as *examples* of election to salvation and therefore as *exact models* for the way God saves any individual. In other words, according to this erroneous view, just as God unconditionally chose Jacob and rejected Esau, so he unconditionally predestines some to heaven and some to hell. But this is not Paul's point. At the most, we may possibly say that God's choosing Isaac and Jacob for service is *analogous at some points* with his electing of individuals to salvation. For one thing, members of spiritual Israel are "children of promise" and not "children of the flesh," even though the promises that apply in this case are not the same promises that set ethnic Israel apart from the rest of the world. Members of spiritual Israel are also chosen and called, though not in the same way that God chose and called ethnic Israel. "Not by works" (9:12) is likewise a key ingredient in being chosen for membership in spiritual Israel, though such membership does require the precondition of faith, as Paul goes on to show in 9:30-10:21 and 11:20-23.

In other words, there are some similarities between election to service and election to salvation, but they are not the same in every detail. To assume that they are would defeat Paul's whole purpose in this section (9:6-13), which is to answer the charge that God is somehow being untrue to his word unless all ethnic Israel is saved. The very essence of his answer is that being chosen for service is *different* from being chosen for salvation. The two Israels are constituted differently, or are established on different bases. The process by which God established ethnic Israel, i.e., through the unconditional choosing of Isaac and Jacob, did not in itself involve their personal salvation, which requires a specific decision of faith (JC, II:68).

1. GOD'S WORD CONCERNING ISRAEL HAS NOT FAILED (9:6A)

9:6 It is not as though God's word had failed. If it is true that much of Israel is "cursed and cut off from Christ" (v. 3) (JC, II:68-69), has something thus gone wrong with God's plan for Israel? Has he failed to keep his word to his people? Paul immediately rejects any such suggestion. His response begins with a strong negative expression, "But it is not as if" (JC, II:69 & n. 34).

The word "failed" is *ekpiptw* (*ekpipto*) (see Acts 12:7; Jas 1:11; 1 Pet 1:24). Here it has the more general meaning of "fail, come to nothing, be annulled" (JC, II:69).

Paul declares that “God’s word” (οἰ λογος" tou' qeou', *ho logos tou theou*) does not fall away or fail. What is meant by “God’s word” (JC, II:69)? In this context “God’s word” refers specifically to his words of *promise*, i.e., the promises he made to and about OT Israel (Dunn, 2:539) (JC, II:69).

2. THE KEY TO THE PUZZLE: THE EXISTENCE OF TWO ISRAELS (9:6B)

But in view of Israel’s lostness and the apparent inconsistency between vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-5, how can it be said that God’s promises to Israel have never failed? The answer, says Paul, lies in the fact that there is not just one Israel, but two. **For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.** This statement clearly affirms the existence of two groups, both called “Israel” but in two different senses: ethnic Israel and spiritual Israel. The former includes all those who bear Abraham’s genes through physical descent from Isaac and Jacob, i.e., the Jews; the latter is composed only of those Jews who also share Abraham’s faith in the God of salvation.

The first group is called “the ones of [or from] Israel.” This expression may mean simply “the ones who belong to the *nation* of Israel,” or it may mean (as the NIV suggests) “the ones who can trace their physical lineage back to the *man* Israel,” i.e., to Jacob whom God renamed Israel. The second group is simply called “Israel,” but it is usually (and rightly) referred to as *spiritual* Israel or even as the *true* Israel, to distinguish it from the former.

These two Israels are not two totally distinct groups, with some Jews belonging to one and some to the other. In fact, *all* Jews belong to the first group, and only *some* to the second. I.e., those in the latter group actually belong to both. The relationship between the two Israels may be depicted not by two side-by-side circles, but by two concentric circles, thus:

Insert chart, but substitute “Physical Israel” for “Physical Israel only.”

We should note that this passage has in view Jewish people only, and thus the “spiritual Israel” in this verse includes only Jewish believers (as the concentric circles indicate). Other NT teaching warrants the conclusion that in this dispensation the church as a whole, including believing Jews and believing Gentiles, may be called the true Israel or spiritual Israel (JC, II:71). This may be depicted thus:

Insert chart

This is not the point of 9:6b, however. See Moo, 573-574.

A key word in this second sentence in 9:6b is *gavr* (*gar*), “for” or “because.” This word indicates that 6a is explained by 6b, i.e., the latter is the *reason why* the former is true. God’s promises concerning Israel have not failed, *because* there are really *two* Israels.

Everyone seems to agree that this is how the two parts of the verse are meant to be connected. There is a serious disagreement, though, as to the *nature* and *recipients* of the promises included in the phrase “God’s word.” Some take God’s word (of promise) to be referring specifically to his promises of *salvation*, or “all his promises relative to the salvation of Israel” (Lard, 298). How can one say, then, that this promise of salvation has not failed, in view of the *lostness* of most Jews (v. 3)? Here is how the point about the two Israels enters in, according to this view: the promises of salvation were made not to ethnic Israel as a whole, but only to spiritual Israel, the remnant (Lard, 298) (JC, II:71).

In my judgment this misses Paul’s point completely. “God’s word” does indeed refer to “the promises made to Israel and its patriarchs” (Fitzmyer, 559), but the main reference is to the promises made to ethnic Israel as a whole, especially the covenant promises (JC, II:72, n. 35). made to the patriarchs regarding God’s messianic purpose for the nation collectively and including the accompanying privileges that served as a means to this end. In other words, God’s promises to ethnic Israel included everything named in vv. 4-5, and every one of these promises was kept.

But did not God’s OT promises include forgiveness and eternal life? Certainly, but here is where the distinction between the two Israels is crucial. Personal salvation was not among the unconditionally guaranteed promises enjoyed by the entire nation of Israel. This blessing was promised only to *spiritual* Israel, the believing remnant. The existence of the two Israels thus resolves the dilemma of vv. 1-5. “All who are descended from Israel” experience the covenant blessings of vv. 4-5, but only the true Israel escapes the curse of eternal damnation. The promises of salvation applied only to the latter. This had always been God’s plan; this is the way it happened; thus his word did not fail.

3. ETHNIC ISRAEL EXISTS BY GOD'S SOVEREIGN CHOICE (9:7-13)

The subject of these next seven verses — this is very important — is not spiritual Israel but ethnic Israel. See my introductory summary of 9:6-29 above (JC, II:72-73).

Thus we must not interpret vv. 7-13 as further elaboration upon the distinction between the two Israels in v. 6, as if these verses are describing *how* or *why* God made that distinction. Nor are these verses somehow meant to *justify* this distinction, contrary to Moo's view (570-571). They are in fact making a point that is separate from 9:6b. The progression of thought from 6b to 7a is thus: Not all members of physical Israel are also members of spiritual Israel; *neither* are they called the children of Abraham just because they are physically descended from Abraham. Thus v. 7 begins a separate thought. The paragraph through v. 13 focuses on the origin and role of ethnic Israel as such, explaining the manner in which God called them into his service. The main point is that this is *different* from the way he calls individuals to salvation. Only when the two are confused do questions about God's faithfulness to Israel arise.

THE CHOICE OF ISAAC (9:7-9)

9:7 Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. This verse (JC, II:73). represents Paul's response to the erroneous assumption of the Jews that just because they were descendants of Abraham, God was obligated to treat them in a certain way (JC, II:73). Paul's point is that this is not true even with regard to Israel's role of service in God's historical plan of redemption, much less their participation in eternal life (JC, II:73-74).

The most common error here is the assumption that v. 7 is parallel to v. 6b, which it is not. Spiritual Israel is not in view in v. 7, thus neither term ("seed," "children") applies to it in this context. The distinction rather is between *all* the physical descendants of Abraham, including those born to Hagar (Gen 16:15) and Keturah (Gen 25:1-5) as well as to Sarah, and *only* those physical descendants of Abraham born through Sarah and Isaac (Gen 21:1-3). Only the latter may be called Abraham's true seed or children. Just being physically descended from Abraham did not establish someone as the "seed of Abraham" named in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15:5, 18; 17:6-8; 22:17-18) (JC, II:74, n. 39). Something more than physical descent is required, as v. 8 specifies.

On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." God made this promise to Abraham as he was explaining to him why the patriarch should not hesitate to sever his connections with his son Ishmael (Gen 21:8-21). The sense of it is, "Through Isaac *alone*, not through Ishmael or any other possible progeny, will come the seed specified in my covenant with you."

The word translated "reckoned" literally means "called." Here it does not have the theological connotation of "called unto salvation" (JC, II:74). At most it may refer to God's call to *service*, i.e., only children born to Isaac will be called upon to continue the covenant responsibilities and receive the covenant blessings given to Abraham. Only those connected with Isaac will be called (named, counted as, recognized as, acknowledged as, reckoned to be) Abraham's true covenant seed. The only thing to remember is that this covenant did not include the promise of salvation as such (JC, II:75).

9:8 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. "In other words" ("this is to say," "this means") introduces the basis upon which God chose Isaac. Though this may well be a general principle that God applies in the context of salvation, that is not how the statement functions here. In this case it relates to the choice of Isaac and thus to the manner in which Israel came into existence.

"The natural children" is literally "the children of the flesh," or children born by purely natural means. It is similar to the expression in 1:3 and 4:1 (*kata; sarkā, kata sarkā*, "according to the flesh"), where "flesh" is used in a morally neutral sense. "The children of the promise" refers to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah concerning the birth of Isaac, as v. 9 shows. They are "children of promise" because they are "born as a result of a promise" (Morris, 354). These children of the promise are identified as "God's children" and as "Abraham's offspring." The latter expression is a loose but accurate paraphrase for one word, "seed" (*sperma*). "Regarded" is *logizomai (logizomai)*, the same word used for the concept of imputation almost a dozen times in Rom 4. Here it simply means "considered to be, counted as, looked upon as." It is equivalent to "reckoned" ("called") in v. 7.

It is easy to see why many take this verse to refer to the distinction between physical Israel and spiritual Israel, and thus take it as referring to the way God elects some to salvation while rejecting others. "God's children" and "children of the promise," as well as the verb *logizomai*, all have salvation connotations in other contexts. (See Moo, 577.) Indeed, we

may agree that there is a significant analogy between the way God chose Isaac for service and the way he chooses individuals for salvation. The concept of *promise* is the main similarity. See Gal 3:14, 16-22, 29; 4:23.

We must remember, though, that such terminology does not always connote the eternal salvation of individuals. The covenant made with Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) was primarily a series of promises, culminating in the promised coming of the Messiah (Acts 13:23,32; 26:6; Rom 15:8; Heb 8:6; 11:9). Thus it is appropriate to think of Israel as a whole as “children of the promise.” The expression “children of God” is surprisingly rare in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to those in a saving relationship with God (Rom 8:16,21; Phil 2:15); at least once it refers to the Jews as a nation (John 11:52; see also Deut 14:1 and Ps 82:6, “sons” of God). It is not inappropriate to see the latter sense here.

We conclude, then, in accord with the present context, that it is ethnic Israel that is here identified as “God’s children” and “children of the promise,” and that these terms describe Israel’s role as the special family through whom God brought the Messiah into the world. This is consistent with 9:4, which says that the Israelites received “the adoption as sons” and “the promises.”

What is Paul’s point? He is simply reminding Israel that their status as God’s children and Abraham’s seed was not something they possessed by an accident of nature, by inherent right, or by meritorious acquisition. It was theirs only by God’s gracious choice and promise. God alone controls the selection process and the terms of selection. In this case God demonstrated his sovereign control by specifying that Abraham’s covenant family would come into existence through one whose own existence was dependent upon nothing except the promise and power of God (JC, II:76, n. 41).

9:9 For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.” Paul’s statement of the promise concerning Isaac is a combination of thoughts from Gen 18:10 and 18:14. God spoke these words during a glorious visitation (a theophany) to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1-15). “At the appointed time” is usually taken to mean “about this time next year.” “I will return” is literally “I will come.” This does not necessarily mean that God was promising another visible manifestation of himself to Abraham and Sarah a year later; no such theophany is recorded in Genesis. It means only that God would come upon Abraham and Sarah in his providential power, opening Sarah’s barren and “dead” womb (Gen 11:30; 18:11; Rom 4:19; Heb 11:11-12) and causing her to conceive contrary to all natural means.

This verse is important because it shows us that Paul’s main concern here is not the general promise of salvation made to all who will believe in God’s mercy, but rather the specific event of the choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael as the one who would carry on the covenant line of his father Abraham — which was a call to service, not to salvation. In fact, v. 8 says that the Israelites were “the children of *the* promise,” meaning the specific promise identified in v. 9.

The first part of this verse specifically reads, “For the word [*lovgo*”, *logos*] of promise is this.” The term *logos* ties this in with 9:6a, where Paul says, “It is not as though God’s word [*logos*] has failed.” This shows that he is mainly concerned here with the charge that somehow God’s words of promise to the *nation* of Israel had failed. The promises are those which establish Israel as the covenant nation, and as words of *promise* they establish God as the one who is in complete control of Israel’s tenure as the covenant people.

Thus there is no reason for anyone to think that God has lost control of the situation with respect to Israel. Though most individual Israelites are accused, God has still kept every promise he ever made to them as a people, as is evidenced by the way he kept one of the very first promises that brought them into existence in the first place.

THE CHOICE OF JACOB (9:10-13)

These next four verses show how God chose a particular son of Isaac to be the one who would carry on his covenant purposes. The debate continues, of course, as to whether this incident is intended to describe the way God chooses individuals for salvation. Does God’s choice of Jacob demonstrate the way he distinguishes true spiritual Israel from ethnic Israel as a whole, or does it tell us how he chooses those who will serve him in the carrying out of his redemptive purposes? In my judgment *only the latter point is being made here*. The focus is exactly the same as in vv. 7-9, namely, the sovereignty of God in establishing the nation of Israel.

9:10 Not only that, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. This truth does more than simply repeat the lesson from Isaac and Ishmael; it strengthens it and clarifies it. Regarding the earlier example, someone might try to argue that the natural circumstances surrounding the births of Abraham’s (first) two sons were so different that the choice of Isaac was no surprise. After all, the boys had different mothers, and Ishmael’s mother was not even Abraham’s true wife. But this cannot be said of Jacob and Esau. As twins, they were the product not only of the same mother, but of the same pregnancy. In addition, Esau was the first-born twin. Thus according to every natural expectation, Esau should have been selected as the covenant seed. The fact that God chose Jacob for this role shows unequivocally that his election of those who will serve his purposes need not be conditioned upon any human circumstance or qualification.

The grammar and syntax of this section are notoriously difficult, but the NIV generally sorts it out quite well (JC, II:78). It is worth noting that based upon the underlying Greek some give the words "from one" a dual force: not only were Jacob and Esau conceived from *one father*, namely, "our father Isaac," but also from just *one act of intercourse*. The point is to minimize any natural distinctions between Esau and Jacob.

9:11 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad Cf. NRSV: "Even before they had been born" (JC, II:79). The point is that God had already made his decision as to his choice between Jacob and Esau, and had already announced it to Rebekah (v. 12), before anything had happened from the human side that might have any possible bearing upon that choice. "Before the twins were born" indicates that the birth order would be irrelevant. Before they "had done anything good or bad" shows that their future conduct was not a factor in the selection.

To introduce divine foreknowledge into the picture here, as some non-Calvinists do, misses the point. Certainly the omniscient God had a complete foreknowledge of the entire lives of both the twins, including which would be born first (v. 12b). But that is not only irrelevant; it tends also to obscure the very point Paul is making, namely, that the choice had nothing to do with either the works or the faith of either twin, whether foreknown or not. God wanted Jacob and not Esau, and that's that.

But someone will say that this sounds a lot like unconditional election, which is a main doctrine of Calvinism, and that we need the concept of foreknowledge here in order to avoid it. I will reply that the choice of Jacob over Esau *was* a case of unconditional election. But this is not a concession to Calvinism, because Paul is not talking about election to *salvation*, but to *service*.

Calvinists themselves usually fail to understand this point. They assume that God's choice of Jacob and his rejection of Esau had to do with the twins' eternal destinies, thus seeing this passage as biblical proof of the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election (JC, II:79-80).

Such statements are true as they apply to God's selection of Jacob for covenant service, and they may be true of election to service in general; but the context does not warrant applying them to election to salvation, as some do.

— **in order that God's purpose in election might stand.** This is the first part of a parenthetical comment (vv. 11b-12a) (JC, II:79), in which Paul is explaining why God's choice of Jacob (and thus of the nation of Israel) was unconditional (v. 11a), namely, so that his purpose according to election might not fail. What was God's purpose for choosing one or the other of these twins? It was the same purpose he had for choosing Abraham in the first place, then Isaac. It was the purpose expressed when God first made his covenant with Abraham: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). This purpose was fulfilled with the birth of the Messiah (9:5b; Acts 13:32-33).

This redemptive purpose was too important to be allowed to depend on the vicissitudes of human behavior. Thus God made it clear from the very beginning that he was going to accomplish his purpose through this particular family regardless of their individual decisions and the direction of their personal piety. He showed this by the very way in which he chose Jacob over Esau, i.e., unconditionally. This means that even if he had chosen Esau over Jacob, he would still have accomplished his purpose.

How this applies to the issue under discussion should be clear. At stake is God's faithfulness in his dealings with the Jews. How could he shower them with the covenant blessings of 9:4-5 and allow them to be lost at the same time? The answer is that the covenant did not include a promise of individual salvation for all Jews; it was limited to God's special use of the nation of Israel as the conduit for bringing Christ into the world. From the beginning God determined that he was going to do this, regardless of whether any individual Jews were saved. Just as "God's purpose in election" did not depend upon the spiritual status of the twin he chose from Rebekah's womb, so it did not depend upon the salvation status of the Jews in Paul's day (JC, II:79).

9:12 . . . not by works but by him who calls. "Not by works" simply explains or restates "before the twins . . . had done anything good or bad" (9:11) (JC, II:81), and (as we have seen) this refers to Jacob's unconditional election for service, not salvation. God's choice of Jacob had nothing to do with any superior qualifications he might have possessed, and it was in spite of any of his potential weaknesses or character flaws. It was simply God's sovereign decision to choose him and use him, and this was a paradigm representing his choice of the nation of Israel as such.

This entire phrase modifies 9:11b; it tells us why it is that God's purpose in election will stand, namely, *not* by virtue of the accomplishments, faith, or faithfulness of the ones called to fulfill that purpose, but solely by the invincible power of the God who called them.

Contrary to some interpretations, the *calling* Paul mentions here has nothing to do with salvation (JC, II:81). "It is election to privilege that is in mind, not eternal salvation," as Morris says (356). The terminology of calling is not used exclusively for calling to salvation in the NT, but on several occasions refers to calling to service. See Heb 5:4; 11:8; Matt 4:21; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:15. Jesus himself says, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14, NASB).

The “many” who are called are probably the nation of Israel as a whole, which was called into God’s service; and the “few” who are chosen are probably the spiritual Israel of Rom 9:6b. This verse from Matthew, especially in its context of the parable of the wedding feast, definitely helps us to understand the nature of the calling to which Paul refers here in 9:12 (JC, II:81-82).

— **she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”** This picks up the thought from v. 11a: before the twins were even born or had done anything good or wrong, God had already told Rebekah which one he was choosing for his covenant purposes. The quote is directly from Gen 25:23 (LXX). The “older” is Esau, who was born first; “the younger” is Jacob.

Commentators argue over whether this divine decree refers to Jacob and Esau as individuals or to the two nations established by each. From Jacob, of course, came Israel; and from Esau came the Edomites. God’s full statement to Rebekah, recorded in Gen 25:23, shows that he originally had the two nations in mind: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” That is probably the main point here. The OT does not record any instance where Esau personally assumed the role of a servant to Jacob, but it does refer to times when the Edomites were in a kind of servitude to Israel or Judah (see Num 24:18-19; 2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kgs 11:15-16; 2 Kgs 14:7).

This is not a serious issue except for those who want to read election of individuals to salvation into this context; they may be inclined to limit Paul’s reference to Jacob and Esau to these men as individuals. Even if this is the case, though, election to service (not salvation) is Paul’s point. The language of servanthood is simply a way of indicating which of the twins would be favored by God and chosen to be the covenant son, and which would not.

9:13 Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” This quotation, from Mal 1:2, continues the thought already elaborated in vv. 10-12 and carries it a step further. By introducing it with the formulaic “it is written,” Paul presents it as a proof text for the point he is making. The main idea is that God’s choice of Jacob and his rejection of Esau were based not on something within these men but upon something within God himself, i.e., his own love and hate.

Two main issues arise here. One is the common question of whether God’s love and hate relate to Jacob’s and Esau’s temporal fortunes or to their eternal destinies. Consistent with their approach to the passage as a whole, many see God’s love as the basis for his unconditional election of Jacob to salvation, and God’s hatred as the basis for his unconditional reprobation of Esau to hell. This is then generalized into the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election as such (see Moo, 585-586).

As we have already seen, however, the subject here is not individual salvation but election to service. This election is unconditional to be sure, but it is election to *service* nonetheless. In reference to this verse we can see this is the case by examining the context of the quotation as it appears originally in Malachi. There it is clear that the main point is not God’s attitude toward and treatment of the two brothers themselves, but of the two nations springing from them. Even more significantly, the consequences of these contrasting attitudes are not eternal destinies but different earthly fortunes (JC, II:83, n. 42).

The other main issue is the meaning of “Esau I hated.” In what sense did God “hate” Esau? Some say Paul is merely employing a semitic hyperbole, in which the strong term “hate,” when used in comparative conjunction with “love,” sometimes simply means “to love less” (JC, II:83). Others agree this is a valid meaning of “hate,” but say that it does not apply here. They equate love with election, and see “hatred” as God’s nonemotional decision to reject Esau (decline to choose him) and just set him aside (JC, II:83). Still others believe, and I agree, that neither of these explanations is strong enough. Murray correctly observes that the treatment of Esau (Edom) in Mal 1:1-5 can hardly be called just a less intense love or even nonselection. It is “a positive judgment, not merely the absence of blessing.” It is “disfavour, disapprobation, displeasure,” a true “holy hate” (2:22-23).

It is difficult to think of this “holy hate,” even in the form of temporal destruction as described in Mal 1:1-5, as unconditional and in no sense related to Edom’s conduct (JC, II:84). Here is where I believe the thought of 9:13 goes a step beyond the basic point of 9:10-12. The main point throughout is God’s sovereignty in his selection of those who will carry out his purposes. His initial choice of Jacob over Esau stresses this sovereignty, even to the point of unconditionality. This quotation seems to show, though, that God’s subsequent historical treatment of their respective nations *was* conditioned to some extent upon their conduct.

In OT references to Edom it is made clear that God’s wrath is divine vengeance against Edom because of its wicked treatment of Israel (JC, II:84). Thus even if God’s original choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau were totally unconditional, his subsequent treatment of them did have respect to their conduct. This does not contradict Paul’s basic premise regarding the manner of God’s original choice of Jacob (and the people of Israel); it simply adds another dimension to his continuing historical relationship with this nation (JC, II:84-85).

B. GOD'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE AND USE PEOPLE WITHOUT SAVING THEM (9:14-18)

As we have said earlier, Paul's main purpose in Rom 9 is to affirm God's sovereign right to choose any individual or group for *service* without at the same time choosing them for *salvation*. The emphasis is not simply upon God's right to choose some while rejecting others; it is also upon the *manner* in which God makes his choices (JC, II:85). God is free to choose people for service in whatever way he wishes.

This present paragraph lies at the heart of this argument. In the previous paragraph Paul demonstrates that this is the way God works by citing the concrete examples of Isaac and Jacob. Now in vv. 14-18 he affirms the general principle of divine sovereignty that underlies all such specific examples: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (v. 15).

This is not an argument in the sense that Paul is attempting to justify God's actions before the bar of reason. He is not trying to defend God by appealing to some cosmic code of conduct that is independent of God and to which God himself is bound. Rather, by citing the general principle as stated in OT Scripture, Paul is simply showing that God's choices of Isaac and Jacob — and therefore of the nation of Israel — were consistent with his own nature and with his own plainly stated principles of action. This is the only sense in which this paragraph may be called a theodicy.

Throughout this study of Rom 9 we must keep in mind that the main issue is *the status of physical Israel*. I.e., if they have been chosen for covenant service, why are they not saved? Thus in 9:14 the question ("Is God unjust?") is not about those whom God has *not* chosen (such as Ishmael and Esau), but about those whom he *has* chosen, i.e., Isaac and Jacob — as forerunners of the nation of Israel. Like Isaac and Jacob, physical Israel did not receive its role in God's plan through personal achievement but solely through God's unconditional choice (vv. 15-16). Therefore it does not have any claim on God's saving grace, and can be chosen *and hardened* at the same time, like Pharaoh (vv. 17-18).

Again we must insist that the issue here is not how God chooses individuals for salvation, contrary to the common Calvinist effort to use this text as a proof for unconditional election (JC, II:86).

1. GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IS CHALLENGED (9:14)

9:14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! Paul dialogues thus with himself when he knows he has just said something that is likely to be misunderstood or to raise objections or false conclusions in the minds of his hearers. "What then shall we say?" is parallel to 3:5; 6:1,15; 7:7. "Not at all!" is *mh; gevnoito* (*me⁻ genoito*), the very strong negative expression frequently used by Paul; see 3:4 above. The question itself, "Is God unjust?" is stated in such a way in the Greek (using the negative particle *me⁻*) that a negative answer is implied and expected. Also, "unjust" is actually a noun, *ajdikiva* (*adikia*). The NASB has a literal translation: "There is no injustice with God, is there?"

The term *adikia* has been used several times already, always for human unrighteousness or wickedness (1:18, 29; 2:8; 3:5; 6:13). That God is righteous does not mean that he conforms to some norm outside himself, since such a norm does not exist. God's essence is itself the highest and ultimate norm, even for his own actions. To say, then, that God is righteous means that his actions always conform to his own essence. He never goes against himself and never acts in a way that is inconsistent with or contradictory to his own nature (JC, II:87).

Thus to say that God is unrighteous or unjust is to accuse him of doing something that violates his very nature — which is impossible. Since it is his nature to be true (3:4) and never to lie (Titus 1:2), his righteousness thus requires that he always be faithful and true to his word. In the context of Rom 9, to suggest that God may be unrighteous or unjust is simply to raise the question again as to whether or not God's word of promise to Israel has failed (9:6a). "The question is — Is God *righteous*? — i.e., has he been true to his covenanted word?" (See JC, II:87, n. 43.)

We must remember that the issue here is the status of national Israel. Thus the objection stated in 9:14 is one that would most likely be raised by the Jews regarding God's treatment of them as a nation. It is a mistake to see this question as something that relates only to the immediately preceding section, and especially to limit it to the rejection of Ishmael and Esau (JC, II:87, n. 44). It relates rather to everything Paul has said in vv. 1-13. "What then shall we say — about the way God chose and has been using Israel? Has his treatment of the nation been unjust? Has his word failed, as some seem to think? No! Absolutely not!" Paul's answer has the intensity and the content of Abraham's conviction in Gen 18:25, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Why is God's treatment of Israel not unjust? Because, as 9:6b says, there really are *two* Israels, and God is not obliged to treat them in the same way. Specifically, he is free to use the nation as a whole for his covenant purposes, while limiting salvation only to those who trust his saving promises (JC, II:88). Ultimately, the question raised and the answer given in vv. 15-18 are really no different from what Paul has already discussed (JC, II:88).

2. GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION FOR SERVICE (9:15-16)

9:15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." The connecting word "for" (*gar*) has several possible meanings. Ordinarily it introduces the cause or reason for the preceding statement. In this case the idea would be, "No, God is *not* unjust, *because* . . ." How does God's statement to Moses show that God is not unjust? The best answer is that Paul believes that the *quoting of OT Scripture* is sufficient to establish his point. (See also v. 17.) Since the main source of the objection in v. 14 would be the Jews, refuting it from their own Scripture would be especially effective (JC, II:88).

And what is the lesson we learn from the Jew's own Scripture (JC, II:88)? No, God has not acted unjustly in his choice of Isaac, in his choice of Jacob, and especially in his choice of the nation of Israel, because Scripture itself records his sovereign right to choose anyone he pleases according to his own terms. He has simply acted in accord with his established word.

The divine statement cited by Paul was spoken "to Moses" (JC, II:89). It was part of God's reply when Moses requested to see the very essence of God: "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory'" (Exod 33:18).

Paul's citation of this statement by God raises several questions. First, does it apply to the eternal salvation of individuals, or to temporal election for service? Second, how does it relate to the overall argument of ch. 9? Third, why is the statement only *positive*, with no corresponding negative reference to exclusion from God's mercy?

The most crucial (and by now, most familiar) issue, of course, is whether the statement applies to God's choice for salvation or for service (JC, II:89). In answering the question every interpreter must show how his view fits into the overall context. But since this statement in 9:15 is a quotation from the OT (Exod 33:19b), this raises the question as to which context should be used to determine whether Paul is referring to salvation or service: Exod 33 or Rom 9? (See JC, II:89.) Actually, both contexts are important, and in the end they yield the same result regarding the issue of salvation or service.

Why did God make this statement in the original context (JC, II:89)? What was its intended application? *To whom* was the statement originally intended to apply: to Moses himself, or to the nation of Israel? Many have concluded the former, i.e., that God was telling Moses that he would be the recipient of God's blessing. This would happen not because of any meritorious accomplishment on Moses' part, however, but solely because of God's sovereign choice (JC, II:90).

In my judgment this view is correct, being true to the context and to the terminology used (as will be explained shortly). But I have concluded that this is not the whole picture, and that the statement in 33:19b must be taken also in the broader context of the immediate crisis concerning Israel, and thus also applies to the nation as a whole. Only then is it relevant to Paul's argument in Rom 9.

Israel's episode with the golden calf, as an act of great sin and even apostasy, certainly raised the question of the salvation of those who were involved (Exod 32:25-35). But it also raised the question of Israel's preservation as the people chosen to serve God's covenant purposes. Moses was very concerned with the latter, especially when God told the people that from that point on he would not be personally present among them on their journey (33:3-5). The visible presence of God had up to that time been a crucial factor in their lives (33:7-11), and Moses argued before God that without his continuing visible presence among them they would not really know if they were still God's unique people, nor would anyone else know (33:12-16).

At this point in the narrative the issue is not the eternal salvation of individual Jews, but Israel's preservation as a nation and her continuing role in God's plan. In reference to God's threat to withdraw his presence, Moses reminds him, "Remember that this nation is your people" (33:13) (JC, II:91).

In the face of Moses' intercessory prayer God relents and tells Moses that he will indeed once more bestow his personal presence upon them (33:15,17). This is the point at which Moses makes his bold request, "Now show me your glory" (33:18), i.e., as an assurance that he and Israel had been restored to God's favor. What follows is the marvelous event of God's unique revelation to Moses, both visibly and audibly (33:19-34:7). Moses' response is a final and humble plea for the nation's reinstatement as God's "inheritance" (34:8-9), though they obviously did not deserve it. God concludes the matter by reestablishing his covenant with Moses and with Israel (34:10-28).

The point is that the critical statement in 33:19b refers not only to God's sovereignty in his choice of which prayers to answer (according to which he granted Moses' request), but also to his sovereignty in his choice of those who will serve him in the accomplishment of his plan of redemption. That God answered Moses' prayer and showed himself to Moses in a unique way was symbolic of his intention to relent and once more to grace the nation with his presence (JC, II:92 & n. 45).

In this light we can see why Paul chose to quote Exod 33:19b in support of his own argument that God's word toward Israel has not failed and therefore that he cannot be accused of injustice in his treatment of them. The issue in Exod 33 and Rom 9 is very much the same: not the salvation of individuals, but the role of the nation in God's plan. The point is that God is free to choose whomever he will, according to whatever conditions he pleases.

One main problem that many will have with this interpretation is the meaning of the terms "have mercy" and "have compassion" (JC, II:92, n. 46). Do not these terms refer to eternal salvation? Not necessarily. These terms and their Hebrew counterparts have a variety of uses, depending upon context.

The verb for "have compassion": $\mu\text{j}\text{r}$ (*racham*) in Exod 33:19b and *oikteivrw* (*oikteiro*) and its cognates refer to the attitude of compassion, mercy, or pity upon someone in any kind of need. It *can* refer to salvation, but it can also refer to compassion expressed only in temporal blessings without any reference to spiritual salvation (JC, II:92).

The word for "have mercy" is used much more often in both testaments. In Hebrew the word refers to saving grace in some contexts; but that is actually one of its lesser meanings. Basically it means to show favor, to be merciful and kind, or to bestow a blessing (JC, II:93). Thus in the Exodus account God could very well be simply saying to Moses, "All right, Moses; I will answer your prayer this time; but remember that it is my sovereign prerogative to determine which prayers I will answer and which I will deny." In light of its OT usage it is completely consistent with the meaning of "have mercy" to interpret Exod 33:19b as referring to God's sovereign choice to answer Moses' prayer and to spare the people of Israel and to continue to use them as his servant nation (JC, II:93).

In Rom 9:15 the Greek word translated "have mercy" also has a range of meanings other than saving mercy (JC, II:93). A few times it does refer to salvation. More often, though, it refers to showing compassion to the poor, sick, or needy. Most significantly, it is sometimes used to refer to God's choosing or calling someone for service, specifically, Paul's call to apostleship: 1 Cor 7:25; 2 Cor 4:1 (JC, II:94, n. 47). This last meaning is the one Paul intends in 9:15, I believe; and it has special reference to God's choice of the nation of Israel to play a crucial role in his covenant purposes. In other words, when God chooses anyone for service, it is the bestowal of a great favor upon that person (or nation), whether that person (or nation) is saved or not.

The next question is how Paul's citation of Exod 33:19b relates to his overall argument in Rom 9. The answer should be obvious. At stake is the righteousness or faithfulness of God in relation to Israel. Does not his choosing of Israel for covenant service imply that all Jewish people should be saved? No, says Paul; as in his choice of Isaac and Jacob, God chooses as it pleases him. He is free to choose *whomever* he likes (JC, II:94, n. 48). He can choose and use people, including the whole nation of Israel, whether they are saved or not. Salvation is neither a prerequisite for nor a necessary result of such a choice. The quote from Exod 33:19b states this as a general principle; the example of Pharaoh in 9:17-18 is a specific example.

The last question about v. 15 is, why does the statement refer only to a positive choice, i.e., one grounded in mercy and compassion? Why is there no reference to God's sovereign rejection of others? This question is meaningful only when one concludes that the passage is talking about the eternal salvation of individuals rather than election to service. For those who hold the former view, the issue is whether or not there is such a thing as double predestination, i.e., both election to salvation and reprobation to damnation (JC, II:94-95). If this passage is indeed discussing election to salvation, there can be no doubt that the double-predestination folks are correct. To say that God is free to show saving mercy unconditionally on whomever he chooses definitely implies that he is free to withhold saving mercy unconditionally from whomever he chooses, and his decision to do the former necessarily entails his decision to do the latter. Such a decision to withhold mercy is in effect a decision to send these nonrecipients to hell, with all the resulting negative implications for the nature of God.

This is why it is so important to see that the issue is not a kind of sovereignty by which God chooses some for salvation and condemns others to hell. Rather, the issue in vv. 7-13 is his sovereignty in choosing one (Isaac, Jacob) *rather than* another (Ishmael, Esau) for a role of service, and the issue in the chapter as a whole is his sovereignty in choosing and using the nation of Israel apart from the promise of individual salvation. Such choosing of Isaac, Jacob and national Israel was a matter of (temporal) mercy and favor, but the nonchoosing of Ishmael and Esau was not *ipso facto* an act of eternal condemnation. Those who were not so chosen are just no longer relevant to the discussion. Thus to have

added, “I will condemn whomever I will condemn” would have been irrelevant and beside the point, not to mention untrue. Even the references to Pharaoh and hardening in 9:17-18 are not about condemnation as such.

9:16 It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. (See JC, II:95.) The main point is that God’s final decision to select someone for his covenant service is based not upon anything in the person himself, but entirely and only upon the divine purpose. If it is God’s purpose to choose someone, he will do so, whether that person is willing or unwilling, or whether he is prepared or not. Of course, God would rather use a willing person who will devote his entire strength to God’s cause. Also, for those tasks that require someone who is especially gifted and trained, God will prepare such a person through his providential control of life circumstances. Examples are Moses and Paul. But for other tasks he can use those who are unwilling and even hostile toward him. Examples are Balaam (Num 22–24) and, of course, Pharaoh (9:17-18). Many in Israel were in this last category.

The thought of this verse is not different from that of v. 15, and is set forth as a logical conclusion (“therefore”) from it. The subject of v. 16 (“it”) is not stated but must be supplied from the context (JC, II:96). Whatever the subject is, it *depends* “on God’s mercy;” Therefore, contrary to some, the subject cannot be mercy itself. In keeping with our overall interpretation, I believe the subject is simply “being chosen for God’s service.”

Being thus chosen does not depend upon human desire or willing. Jacob is a perfect example; he was chosen before he was born and contrary to the will of his father Isaac (Gen 27). Nor does it depend on human effort. “Effort” is literally “the running one” or “the one who runs.” This refers to “moral attainment” (Piper, *Justification*, 153), or vigorous, purposeful striving as in the running of a race (JC, II:96). This applies, of course, to election to service in general, and specifically to God’s purpose for Israel (JC, II:96, n. 50).

Such election for service is a matter of “the one who shows mercy, namely, God,” as the text literally says (JC, II:97).

3. GOD’S PURPOSES CAN BE SERVED BY THE UNSAVED (9:17-18)

9:17 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.” Paul takes this quote directly from Exod 9:16. Obviously “the Scripture” did not say this to Pharaoh. God himself, through Moses, spoke these words to him (JC, II:97).

Once again the sentence begins with “for” (*gar*) (JC, II:97). I believe it is likely that the *gar* in v. 17 is parallel to the *gar* in v. 15, each relating equally to v. 14. Thus vv. 15-16 and vv. 17-18 are two distinct points, each confirming that God’s treatment of the Jews is not unjust (v. 14) by citing data from the OT (JC, II:97).

The conclusion of this entire section is that God is free to choose whomever he pleases for roles of service (JC, II:96). But the question here is if God is going to use the Jews for service, is he not thereby obligated to save them? This is the point addressed in vv. 17-18. Here Paul shows from the OT that God’s sovereignty in election for service includes the prerogative of choosing and using someone without saving them. His premiere example is Pharaoh. Not only was he chosen (“shown mercy”), but he was also hardened (confirmed in his unbelief).

A very common approach to this text is to take Pharaoh as an example of *reprobation* (condemnation to hell), in contrast with Moses, who is an example of election to *salvation*. Verses 15-18 are taken as parallel to the two parts of v. 13. “Jacob I loved” is equivalent to the positive example of Moses in vv. 15-16, while “Esau I hated” corresponds to the negative example of Pharaoh in vv. 17-18 (Moo, 593; Morris, 360). According to Pendleton (MP, 398), Moses and Pharaoh are a pair between whom God chooses, just as he chose between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau. And in this “third case he granted favor to Moses, and *meted out punishment* to Pharaoh.”

I believe this approach is a very serious error, not only because the context is not dealing with the question of eternal destinies, but also because it is not warranted by what the text specifically says about Pharaoh and the others. For one thing, Moses is not introduced here as the object of election, whether for service or for salvation. He is simply the one to whom God spoke the statement in 9:15 and is not being used as an example of anything. Thus it is not proper to speak of a “contrast between Moses and Pharaoh.” For another thing, there is no parallel between Esau and Pharaoh. Esau was not chosen for anything; but Pharaoh *was* chosen for a significant role, a fact that is crucial for Paul’s point (JC, II:98).

God’s rejection and punishment of Pharaoh are indeed significant, but *not* as a parallel with Ishmael and Esau, and not even as a contrast with Isaac, Jacob, or Moses. They are significant only insofar as they make Pharaoh an exact parallel of the nation of Israel itself. God chose both Israel and Pharaoh for a role of service, and he used both of them not only *despite* their hardness of heart, but even *because* of it. Pharaoh is not an example of God’s freedom to *reject* whom he will, contrary to Godet (352-353). Rather, he is an example of God’s freedom to elect some for service while at the same time withholding salvation from them (JC, II:99).

In the affirmation “I raised you up,” God is saying that he exercised his sovereign prerogative to choose Pharaoh for a very specific role in his redemptive plan. “For this very purpose” stresses the fact that Pharaoh was being used by God, even when it seemed that he was most emphatically opposing God. He was carrying out the divine purpose in and through his hardened heart.

God’s purpose for Pharaoh was twofold: to be an instrument for displaying God’s power and for proclaiming God’s name in all the earth. The power to which God refers is not the power to save individuals from their sins (1:16), but the power to overthrow opposing earthly rulers and their so-called deities, and thereby the power to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery and oppression. How did God display this power “in” or “through” Pharaoh? By hardening his heart so that he continued to refuse to let the people go, thereby giving God the opportunity to add plague upon plague all the way to the climactic death of the Egyptian firstborn. What God needed from Pharaoh was not his immediate acquiescence but his continuing resistance. This he achieved by his providential power to harden the Egyptian’s heart (GRu, 203), thus providing the occasion for the public and overwhelming display of his might.

The second part of God’s purpose for Pharaoh (a direct consequence of the first) was the proclamation of the name of the true God in all the inhabited earth. “My name” does not have to refer to any one particular name, such as Exod 3:14, or Exod 33:19 or 34:6-7. The point is simply that God intended his utter defeat of Pharaoh’s gods (via the plagues) and Pharaoh’s forces (in the Red Sea) to be trumpeted abroad, so that everyone would know that Israel’s God was the one true God, and that all other so-called “gods” are nothings.

In fact, thanks to the way God used Pharaoh through the whole episode of the Exodus, God’s name and power *were* magnified in all the nations (JC, II:100). The display of power in Egypt shook the surrounding nations and was a continuing testimony to God’s omnipotence for the Israelites themselves. Indeed, it continued to be celebrated throughout their history (JC, II:100).

That God is free to use as his instruments even hardened unbelievers such as Pharaoh was something any Jew would have granted (JC, II:100). Paul simply wanted the Jews to see that the same principle applied to them as a nation. They could serve God’s purposes, whether they were believers or not.

9:18 Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. “Therefore” indicates this is the logical conclusion or summarized result, not just from vv. 15-17, but from the whole discussion in vv. 6-17 (JC, II:100).

As we have stressed repeatedly, the subject of this section is not eternal salvation but election to service. That is true of this verse also (JC, II:101).

God’s divine sovereignty is the main emphasis here: “on whom he wants.” This verb is *qelw* (*thelo*), “to wish, to will.” God’s choice of the one to receive mercy and the one to harden is purely a matter of his own will. He does not have to justify his choices; his sovereignty is grounded in the very fact that he is, after all, *God*. Just because he is God, he “is free to choose whom he will for what he will” (MP, 400).

The common approach to this verse, whether seen as dealing with salvation or service, is that 18a refers to Moses and 18b to Pharaoh. Murray’s statement is typical: “As Moses, in this context, exemplifies mercy, so Pharaoh hardening” (2:28) (JC, II:102).

In my judgment, though, this is not the point of v. 18. The mercy and the hardening are not exclusive, but may be bestowed upon the *same person* (or group) (JC, II:102). “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy” refers thus to God’s sovereign choosing of whomever he pleases to serve his purposes. But the second half of v. 18 does not refer to individuals or a group of individuals that are separate and distinct from those in 18a. It refers rather to certain individuals *within* the first, inclusive category. God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, i.e., he calls into his service whom he wants to call into his service; *but* some of these can serve his purposes only by being hardened. Thus it was with Pharaoh. God bestowed favor upon him by selecting him for a key role, but he could fill that role only by being hardened (JC, II:102).

The obvious and intended application of this whole section, 9:14-18, is to the nation of Israel. God bestowed a temporal mercy upon them when he chose to use them in his redemptive plan, but he also hardened at least some of them (11:7,25) in reference to the role he wanted them to play. There is no divine inconsistency or contradiction here, either with Pharaoh or with Israel.

What is the nature of the *hardening* of which Paul speaks? This is obviously a reference to the OT teaching about Pharaoh, and to the fact that God used him in his service specifically by hardening his heart. The Greek word is *sklhrvnw* (*skle-ryno*) (JC, II:103, n. 52), which means “to make firm, to harden.” It can refer to something physical but is more often used figuratively for a hardened attitude or state of mind. In Scripture it usually refers to a hardened attitude toward God, an attitude of resistance and rebellion toward God’s will. Also, in Scripture it is something that a person does to himself; hence the warnings in Hebrews to “not harden your hearts” (Heb 3:8,15; 4:7, quoting Ps 95:8) (JC, II:103).

The Exodus narrative refers to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in various ways: (a) his heart "became hard" or "was hardened" (7:13,14,22; 8:19; 9:35; 13:15); (b) he hardened his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34); (c) God promises to harden his heart (4:21; 7:3; 14:4); (d) God did harden his heart (9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:8). God also hardened the hearts of other Egyptian officials and soldiers (9:34; 10:1; 14:17).

Much is made of these different ways of speaking. It is assumed from them that the occasions when Pharaoh hardened his own heart are somehow distinct from those occasions when God hardened it. Then it is usually declared that Pharaoh's self-hardening preceded God's action (JC, II:103-104).

I believe this analysis is unnecessary and misleading. Throughout the series of encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, from beginning to end, God was working providentially to harden Pharaoh's heart. On every occasion where his heart was hardened, the hardening was accomplished by *both* God *and* Pharaoh. On each occasion it was Pharaoh who made the conscious and deliberate decision to not let the people go. But prior to this moment I suggest that God was working within Pharaoh's mental processes, causing such thoughts to enter his consciousness that he could not bear to grant or follow through with permission to let the people go (JC, II:104). How did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Perhaps by flooding his mind with thoughts such as what a great loss of free labor it will be to lose these Israelites! or what a laughing-stock the king of Egypt will be when other nations hear how a bunch of slaves had their way with him! Such thoughts would have great validity in the mind of Pharaoh, and God could have pressed them upon his consciousness at just the right time, i.e., when he was weakening and about to let the people go (GRu, 203).

While it is true that Pharaoh's heart was already self-hardened toward God in a general way before God hardened his heart, this was not in fact the *reason* why God worked this specific hardness upon him (JC, II:104, n. 53). Many emphasize such a cause/effect connection, though, because they think God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart had something to do with his *salvation*. But the two are not causally related. Like any pagan unbeliever, Pharaoh had a heart that was self-hardened toward the true God (1:18-32), and God may already have confirmed him in that unbelief according to the principle implied in 1:24,26,28. But the divine hardening of Pharaoh in 9:18 is of a different kind. It is not about salvation as such; it is about how someone whose heart is already self-hardened by sin can in fact be fitted into God's cast of characters for working out his redemptive plan.

Thus we do not have to think of God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as some kind of *punishment* for his sins (JC, II:105). This sort of thinking, while popular, is a serious misunderstanding of Paul's concept of hardening. It confuses the general self-hardening of rebellious unbelief with God's providential hardening in order to accomplish a specific temporal purpose. The hardening of Pharaoh, both in Exod 4:14 and here in 9:18, is of the latter type, not the former. It in fact had only one specific goal: to cause Pharaoh to oppose God's demand that he set the Israelites free. God expressed his purpose clearly: "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Exod 4:21).

This particular hardening was not a natural consequence of Pharaoh's already rebellious heart, nor an act of divine retribution against him because of this rebellion. It did not cause him to be lost, nor did it somehow intensify his lostness. It simply brought him to a state of mind that resulted in his decision to forbid the Israelites to leave. This occurred over and over, which in turn allowed God to send plague after plague, which in turn accomplished the purposes stated by Paul: "that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (9:17).

What this shows, in reference to Paul's overall point in Rom 9, is that God can call into his service someone who is lost (by his own choice), and can use him in a significant way even if that person's heart must be divinely hardened in some special manner. The ultimate application of this truth is to the nation of Israel. It demonstrates how God could take Israel, a nation comprised mostly of self-hardened sinners, and use them in their lost state to carry out his purposes. Paul's point is not to explain *why* such people are lost, but simply to affirm that God can use them even though they *are* lost (JC, II:106).

C. GOD USED ETHNIC ISRAEL TO PRODUCE SPIRITUAL ISRAEL (9:19-29)

We must remember two things: First, the main point in Rom 9–11 is the issue of God's faithfulness in his dealings with the nation of Israel (JC, II:106). Second, the reason why first-century Jews saw this as a problem was that they assumed that God's calling them into his covenant service guaranteed their final salvation. Paul is in the process of pointing out that this is a false assumption (JC, II:106).

But is not God the God of *salvation*? And is not salvation the inherent and ultimate purpose of the covenant with Israel? So how can God be true to his word and at the same time cut Israel off from this very salvation? The basic answer is that there are *two Israels* (9:6b). Israel the *physical* nation was God's main historical instrument or means for making salvation a reality (9:5); the Israel whose origin and essence is *spiritual* is the actual recipient of the salvation.

Paul develops this thought in two stages. First, in 9:7-18 the subject is physical Israel, Israel the nation (JC, II:107). Now in the second stage of this explanation, of which 9:19-29 is a part, the focus of attention is *spiritual* Israel, the group which is the recipient of God's saving mercy. A major point of this section is the fact that the calling and saving of spiritual Israel was all along a part of the very purpose for the existence of ethnic Israel. In other words, it has always been God's sovereign purpose to distinguish between the two Israels, as the remnant prophecies show (9:27-29). The *means* by which God distinguishes between them is explained in 9:30-10:21.

In summary, just as 9:7-18 explains how God separated physical Israel from the rest of the world, so does 9:19-10:21 explain how God separates spiritual Israel from physical Israel.

Here is how the present section (9:19-29) unfolds. First, by way of transition, Paul words an objection he anticipates from his Jewish readers (v. 19). His immediate response (vv. 20-21) is to issue a stern generic warning about how presumptuous it is for the creature (the clay) to challenge the ways of the Creator (the potter).

Applying the potter-clay analogy to the particular issue at hand, Paul then begins his specific reply to the objection in v. 19 by succinctly summing up God's purpose and intention for the two Israels (vv. 22-24). Like a potter, God has the right to take one lump of clay (the original nation of Israel) and make two completely different kinds of vases from it. One consists of those individuals who are Israelites by physical birth only. Like Pharaoh, they are unbelievers and will ultimately suffer the wrath of God. This is actually the bulk of Israel. So why does God put up with these "vessels of wrath"? Because only through them can he bring into existence the "vessels of mercy," i.e., spiritual Israel, which is the *church* — a group composed not only of believing Jews but of believing Gentiles as well.

In these three verses (22-24) is summed up one whole major aspect of the history and purpose of Israel. It is a supplement, as it were, to vv. 4-5.

To show that this is not some new and alien concept that he has hatched out of his own brain, Paul then cites prophecies from Hosea and Isaiah. These biblical texts show that this has been God's intention for Israel — and the Gentiles — all along (vv. 25-29) (JC, II:108).

This does not end Paul's reply to the objection in v. 19, "Why does God still blame us?" Actually it only prepares the way for the main response to this question, which is given in 9:30-10:21. The curse upon physical Israel (9:3), and upon the individual Jews of which it is composed, is *not unconditional*, as if God were arbitrarily assigning some to eternal wrath. Nor are the individuals within spiritual Israel unconditionally elected to salvation. As 9:30-10:21 shows, the difference between the two Israels is *justification by faith*. Physical Israel, the vessels of wrath, are those who seek to be justified by their own righteousness, while spiritual Israel, the vessels of mercy, accept Christ's salvation through faith. This connection between 9:19 and 9:30-10:21 must not be missed.

This point *is* missed, of course, by those who think ch. 9 is a fundamental proof text for unconditional election. They find this doctrine especially in vv. 19-23, which they see as simply repeating the point of vv. 7-18 (JC, II:108). However, this approach hopelessly confuses two entirely distinct acts of God: one, his dealing with physical Israel in terms of unconditional election to service; and two, his way of distinguishing between physical Israel and spiritual Israel by the condition of faith.

It is important to see that in this present section (9:19-29), unlike in vv. 7-18, eternal destinies are now an important part of the picture, since the distinction between the two Israels has eternal consequences. But we must be careful not to apply the affirmations of God's sovereign, unconditional choice of the nation as such (vv. 7-18) to the respective eternal destinies of the individuals within the two groups.

In this paragraph, for the first time in this major section (chs. 9-11), Paul introduces the issue of the Gentiles. For some, the incorporation of the Gentiles into spiritual Israel is the key point of the paragraph (JC, II:109).

It is true that believing Gentiles are here identified as being included within the new Israel. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this is not a major point of the paragraph. The main emphasis here is still God's faithfulness in his dealings with physical Israel. I.e., his use of them has been in every way consistent with his stated purposes.

1. THE OBJECTION (9:19)

9:19 One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" The context here indicates that this objection is placed in the mouth of a typical first-century Jew (JC, II:109-110). The issue is the status of the Jewish nation as such. In 9:3 Paul clearly implies that the bulk of his physical brethren were under eternal condemnation, "cursed and cut off from Christ." He recognizes that the intervening references to God's unconditional decisions regarding mercy and hardening may cause some Jews to conclude that this explains why they were lost, even

though this is not his point. This in turn generates their objection, which “runs thus: But, Paul, if God shows mercy to whom he will, and if he hardens whom he will, then it is he who has hardened us Jews in unbelief against the gospel. Why, then, does he still find fault with us, since he himself, according to your argument, has excluded us from blessedness, and made us unfit for mercy?” (MP, 402). How can God hold us responsible for our unbelief and therefore condemn us to hell (v. 3), if our hardening and therefore our unbelief are his own doing? Does this not all the more suggest that he is unjust (v. 14)?

In his second question — literally, “For who has resisted his will?” — the objector seeks to justify his first question by appealing to what seems to be an unassailable theological axiom: no one can resist the will of the sovereign God (JC, II:111, n. 56). Has not Paul himself appealed to this very axiom in vv. 15 and 18? (See JC, II:111.)

But is it not possible for a free-will creature to resist or oppose God’s will? Is this not the very essence of sin? Yes, if by “will” we mean God’s *preceptive* will, i.e., his laws, his commandments, and even his desires. God’s preceptive will can be rejected and thwarted by human beings. (See JC, II:111 & GRu, 310-313). But if we are talking about God’s *purposive* will, i.e., his deliberate purposes and determinative decisions, then the answer is no, it is *not* possible for any human being to oppose, violate, or resist his will in this sense (Ps 33:11; Prov 19:21; Isa 14:27; John 6:40; Acts 2:23; 4:28; Eph 1:11). (Ibid., 304-310).

In 9:19 the objector’s questions seem to have the latter aspect of God’s will in mind, and so the objection does involve a valid theological truth, i.e., no one has ever truly resisted God’s purposive will. But if this is the case, then why is God blaming *us* for our sin and rebellion against him? If “he hardens whom he wants to harden” (9:18), then our sin and rebellion are actually *his* will, are they not? So why is he punishing us as if we were *resisting* his will, when in reality we are not — since no one can? (See Cranfield, 2:489; Piper, *Justification*, 186).

A crucial issue at this point is whether or not the objection is valid in the sense that it correctly and accurately represents the meaning of Paul’s teaching in the previous verses. Is this a legitimate conclusion to draw from vv. 15-18? Many say that it is (JC, II:112). However, I have concluded that this approach is incorrect. The objection raised here by the Jew is based on a misunderstanding.

Wherein lies the error? First, we should emphasize that it does not lie in the objector’s second question, “For who has resisted [resists, can resist] his will?” As noted above, there is such a thing as God’s *purposive* will, his eternal purpose which is irresistible and immutable, and which therefore cannot be opposed by mere creatures (JC, II:112).

Wherein, then, is the error? The objector’s misunderstanding was in assuming that this purposive will of God applied to Israel’s salvation status (9:3) as well as to the nation’s historical role in accomplishing God’s redemptive plan. To say it another way, the objector took Paul’s statements in vv. 15-18 as explaining why most Israelites were hardened to the point of rejecting their Messiah and thus being cursed. However, as we have seen, this is not Paul’s point. In these verses he is affirming God’s right to sovereignly choose and use anyone, even sinners, to serve his covenant purposes, and even to harden them with regard to certain decisions if this is necessary (JC, II:112-113).

One reason why interpreters assume that the objector must have understood Paul correctly is that they conclude that the Apostle does not try to refute the objection; he simply rebukes the objector for his presumptuous attitude (JC, II:113, n. 59). But this is simply not true, as I have explained in the introduction to this section. Paul does rebuke the questioner (20-21), and he does reaffirm and explain God’s inviolable purposive will for Israel the nation (22-29). But then (9:30–10:21) he sets forth a lengthy reply to the objector’s first question, “Then why does God still blame us?” The reply, in effect, is simply this: “Because you refused to believe in your own Messiah.” The attempt to excuse such unbelief by illegitimately applying God’s purposive will to this circumstance is thereby repudiated.

2. PAUL’S INITIAL REBUKE OF THE OBJECTOR’S ATTITUDE (9:20-21)

These two verses are not a specific response to the objection worded in v. 19, nor are they meant to preclude such a response. They are only a preface to the more detailed response which follows. As a rebuke, they are directed more toward the tone of the objection than its content. The rebuke is actually generic and may be applied to many a presumptuous and misguided complaint against God’s purposes and providence.

9:20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? In the NIV, “but” translates a much stronger Greek expression better rendered “on the contrary,” as in the NASB. This indicates that Paul is about to correct the erroneous thinking by which the objector seeks to justify himself: “Hey, it’s not *my* fault! God made me do it. So why should I be blamed?” “On the contrary,” says Paul; “you have missed the whole point. Let me explain it to you” (JC, II:114 & n. 60). Unfortunately, many overlook the fact that Paul spends the rest of ch. 9 and all of ch. 10 correcting the objector!

The first part of Paul's correction (vv. 20-21) is directed toward the objector's presumptuous attitude; the Apostle rebukes him for arguing with God. We must realize that the objector is not portrayed as simply raising a sincere question concerning God's ways. Rather, the man is described as arrogantly taking a debater's stance against God; he is "talking back" to God, says Paul (JC, II:114).

The objector is addressed as "O man." This seems to be a way of emphasizing his mere creaturehood, in contrast with the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator. "Who are you, a mere *human being*, a 'feeble morsel of sinful dust' (MP, 403), to argue against *God*?" (See JC, II:114.)

"Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" The NIV puts this question in quotation marks because it represents the thought of Isa 29:16 and Isa 45:9, where the clay and the vessel made from it are likewise depicted as sitting in judgment on the potter. As Paul uses the metaphor in v. 20b, the complaint comes not from the clay as such but from the piece of pottery formed from it. The scene is almost comical: a finished pot is lifted from the potter's wheel and, personified, looks upon itself with disappointment. It then glares accusingly at the potter and reprimands him thus: "Why did you make me to look like this? I'm a mess! Is this the best you could do? Haven't you made some sort of mistake?"

The potter-clay analogy can be used to teach many lessons (JC, II:115), and we are rightly warned to stick to the point Paul is making here and not to try to apply all the details indiscriminately (Cranfield, 2:491). What is Paul's point? Just this: in a potter-clay relationship it is obviously the potter who decides how the clay will be used. Once his decision is made and the vessel has been formed, it is the height of absurdity and arrogance for the vessel to criticize the potter.

Why does Paul use this metaphor here? To what or whom does it specifically apply? Not to the original creation event; not just to individuals such as Pharaoh; and especially not to "the destinies of individual men." Its specific application is to the nation of Israel. This is how the analogy is used in Jeremiah: "Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?' declares the Lord. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel'" (Jer 18:5-6) (JC, II:115).

Thus Paul is rebuking the objector of v. 19 not in the latter's role as a creature nor as a condemned sinner as such, but in his role as a representative of Israel who is complaining that God's treatment of the nation is basically unfair. To such an objection Paul simply says, "Whoa! Let's not forget who we are, shall we? Remember: God is the potter; you (Israel) are just clay in his hands. Who do you think you are, to challenge the one who formed you in the first place?"

9:21 Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? While Paul's reference to the potter and the clay in v. 20 was somewhat general, here he gets more specific. He refers to the potter's right and authority to do with the clay (Israel) whatever he chooses, particularly to his right to make from the same lump the two Israels of 9:6b (JC, II:116).

It is obvious that the potter here represents God, but to whom does the "same lump" refer? (JC, II:116). In keeping with the overall context, the "same lump" here refers not to the mass of human individuals as such but to the totality of Israel, from which God makes the two derivative groups, physical Israel and spiritual Israel (JC, II:117).

From the same lump of clay, says Paul, the potter has the right to make pieces of pottery that are very different in their nature and disposition. On the one hand he can make from it a vessel *ejj* "timhvn (*eis time* \bar{n}), "unto honor"; on the other hand he can make from it a vessel *ejj* "ajtimivan (*eis atimian*), "unto dishonor."

This statement raises some key issues. First, how are these terms — honor and dishonor — related to each other? One approach is to take them in a comparative sense: one vessel is given more honor, the other less honor. This is the point of the NIV: some "for noble purposes and some for common use" (JC, II:117). However, a better approach is to take the terms in their more natural sense as *opposites* rather than as comparatives. If the vessels unto honor and unto dishonor in v. 21 are equivalent to the vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath in vv. 22-23, then they must be taken in an opposite and not just a comparative sense (JC, II:117). This also seems to better fit the actual meaning of the terms used. As a result, the NIV rendering is misleading.

This leads to the second and more overriding issue: do these terms refer to God's creation of all individuals for the specific purpose of saving some ("for noble purposes") and sending the rest to hell ("for common use")? Or do they refer to God's preparation of some individuals and even some nations for specific uses in the accomplishment of his historical plan of salvation? Those taking the former view naturally see the terms *time* \bar{n} and *atimia* as opposites; advocates of the latter view see them as comparative.

Calvinists argue for the former view (JC, II:118). Others, especially non-Calvinists, argue for the latter view (JC, II:118). I cannot accept either of these two views. I do agree that the main reference here is to the nation of Israel, and not to the human race as such. But at the same time I believe Paul is referring not to how God used this nation in his historical plan, but to the eternal destinies of individuals within it.

It is unlikely that the point here is simply God's right to prepare and use individuals and nations — especially Israel — for his covenant purposes, because Paul has already made this point in vv. 7-18. An even more convincing reason, though, is the use of the word *atimia*, or “dishonor.” The source and nature of the objection worded in v. 19 indicates that Paul is addressing here in vv. 20-21 the status of the Jews; thus the terms “honor” and “dishonor” must apply in some way to this group. Most who take the latter view outlined above would see unfaithful Israel as an example of a “vessel of dishonor” (e.g., Morris, 366).

My contention, though, is this: if this verse applies only to the way God *uses* nations, especially Israel, for his historical redemptive plan, there is *no way* that the role of Israel — believing or unbelieving — can be described as dishonorable or even menial. The term *atimia*, however interpreted, simply does not fit the use God made of the nation of Israel. Theirs was indeed the most exalted and honorable role imaginable, apart from that of the Messiah himself (9:4-5). Thus this interpretation of v. 21 cannot stand.

What, then, is the alternative? I believe Calvinists are right to see “honor” and “dishonor” as referring to eternal destinies, heaven and hell. But I believe they are wrong on two counts. First, they are wrong to assume that the “clay” refers to the human race in general. The clay is not the mass of humanity, but the nation of Israel only. Second, Calvinists are wrong to think that God made two separate vessels from this clay for the express purpose of sending one to heaven and the other to hell. “Unto honor” and “unto dishonor” do indeed refer to the eternal destinies of individuals within Israel, but these respective destinies are not determined by God himself. The next main section, 9:30–10:21, shows that individuals determine their own eternal destinies according to whether or not they put their trust in God's saving promises.

This distinction applies even to the people of Israel. God used the nation in its totality to accomplish his exalted redemptive purposes, and this honor belongs to believing and unbelieving Jews alike. But with regard to eternal destinies, God has exercised his sovereign right, like a potter, to make an internal separation among the individuals of whom this nation is composed. He makes from the one lump a vessel of honor, *spiritual Israel*, whose distinguishing characteristic is faith in God's gracious promises. Also from this same lump he makes a vessel of dishonor, the majority of the original nation, whose distinguishing characteristic is that, even though they are Jews physically, they have never given their hearts to God (JC, II:120).

A key point here is that this distinction between the vessel of honor and the vessel of dishonor, though decreed by God, is ultimately the responsibility of the individuals placed within each group (JC, II:120). This view is supported by Jer 18:1-12, where God compares his relationship with Israel as that of potter to clay. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (18:6b). But God makes it clear that this potter-clay relationship does not mean that he arbitrarily determines the destiny of the nation. He declares that he tailors his final decision regarding any nation or kingdom to the way it responds to his warnings (18:7-12; see Smith, 2:20). In his role as a potter, God's method of dealing with nations must surely also apply to his dealing with individuals.

We should remember that the main point of vv. 20-21 is to rebuke the objector in v. 19 for his presumptuousness in talking back to God. The metaphor of the potter and his clay is a generic warning applicable to anyone who presumes to do the same in any sort of circumstance. We know that Paul intends that it be applied to Israel in the way explained above because of the way he himself continues the metaphor in vv. 22-24.

3. BEYOND ETHNIC ISRAEL TO SPIRITUAL ISRAEL (9:22-24)

In these next three verses Paul begins his specific response to the objection in v. 19. Basically he grants the objector's second point, that no one truly resists God's purposive will. This is surely true regarding Israel. Undeterred by massive unbelief, yea, even enduring it, God used this nation to accomplish his intended purpose for them.

That purpose first and foremost was to bring the Messiah himself into the world (9:5). But that is not the whole story. In these three verses Paul reveals another purpose for which God was using the nation of Israel: through them he brought into existence the other Israel, the true Israel, spiritual Israel, the remnant (9:6b). And here he mentions for the first time in this chapter the fact that believing *Gentiles* are also included within this spiritual Israel, the entity for which it was the glorious purpose of physical Israel to prepare.

In its fullness, then, spiritual Israel is no less than the church of Jesus Christ, which is composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, i.e., of anyone who accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord. It was God's *purposive* will to use ethnic Israel as an instrument for bringing forth the church. In this respect the objector is correct: no one could have resisted God's purpose to do this.

But the objector erred in thinking that this same principle (“Who resists his will?”) was the explanation for Israel’s state of accursedness (9:3). As Paul will explain in the next section (9:30– 10:21), the reason for their condemnation was their resistance to God’s *preceptive* will, i.e., that believing submission to Jesus Christ is a requirement for salvation.

The tragic irony of this, of course, is that most Israelites were lost because they refused to become a part of the very group whose origin was a major reason for their own existence (JC, II:121).

This section is difficult to understand and translate because, even though the syntax is quite extended and complicated, it does not form a complete sentence. Verse 22 begins with the word “if,” but as is sometimes the case in Greek literature, the expected second part of such a sentence, the “then” part, never appears (JC, II:122).

There is a fairly general agreement that the NIV captures the intended sense very well. Paul asks, “What if God endured the vessels of wrath, in order that he might bring forth vessels of mercy?” (See JC, II:122.)

How does this relate to the objection in v. 19? The thought seems to be this: “What if it is so, in accordance with his role as a potter, that God sovereignly forms the nation of Israel and bears with their unfaithfulness in order to accomplish his purpose for them? So what if it is true, as you say, that no one can resist his will in this matter? Does this explain and excuse your sin? Does this shift responsibility for your condemnation to God? No!”

9:22-23 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? 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 . . . ? (See JC, II:122.)

These verses form a single unit of thought, a thought which can be discerned only by working through a series of very difficult exegetical questions. As we have often seen, the Calvinist and the non-Calvinist give very different answers to such questions.

THE CALVINIST VIEW

The Calvinist interpretation is as follows. As to the scope of Paul’s remarks, it is assumed that he is dealing here with the human race in general. The “objects of wrath” are the reprobate, the total number of lost human beings (Calvin, 367; Hendriksen, 2:328). The reprobate are lost because they were from the beginning “prepared for destruction” by God himself (JC, II:123).

God determines to create a certain amount of human beings as objects of wrath simply as a decision of his secret, purposive will (which is the implication of the word “choosing” in the NIV). Calvinists usually speak of two types or levels of God’s will: his revealed, expressed will and his secret, ultimate will. Things do not always happen according to the former, but the latter is all-inclusive and all-determinative (see GRu, 301-310) (JC, II:124).

On the one hand this determinative counsel by which God determines the fate of the lost is said to be “secret” and “incomprehensible,” says Calvin (367). But on the other hand it seems that it is not hidden very well, because Calvin and others believe that in v. 22 Paul is telling us the reason why God prepares some for destruction, i.e., “to show his wrath and make his power known.” Because he wants to display his wrath and power in punishing the wicked, God assigns some to eternal condemnation in hell (JC, II:124). In fact, according to Calvinism the very reason God is patient is to magnify his wrath.

But this is not the whole story. Verse 23 adds another reason why God “bore with great patience the objects of his wrath.” He did it in order “to make the riches of his glory known” to the elect, which are chosen unconditionally for salvation. As Calvin interprets it, this means that God delays punishing the reprobate, thus increasing their punishment, because the greater the punishment poured out upon the reprobate, the greater will appear the mercy bestowed upon the elect (JC, II:125).

SEEING PAUL THROUGH NON-CALVINIST EYES

Since Calvinists tend to see this entire chapter in terms of the unconditional predestination of individuals to their eternal destinies, it is not unexpected that they interpret these two verses as outlined above. But as we have seen, unconditional individual election and reprobation are not the point of this chapter. It deals rather with God’s faithfulness in all his dealings with the nation of Israel. That is the subject of these two verses as well.

One point that Paul has stressed throughout this chapter is that God has the sovereign right to choose and use both individuals and nations in whatever ways he pleases for the accomplishment of his covenant purposes. No one “resists his will” in such matters (v. 19). These verses are simply reaffirming God’s right, like a potter, to manipulate his clay in any way he chooses.

The “objects of his wrath” in v. 22 are not the total mass of lost human beings, but rather the nation of Israel, specifically the ethnic Jews who rejected God’s promises of grace and were thus accursed (9:3) (JC, II:125-126).

What is the “destruction” for which Israel has been prepared? It is possible that Paul is thinking about temporal destruction, such as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Godet, 360). This may be the case, but it is also likely that Paul is referring to the final, eternal destruction of sinners in hell, since its counterpart of “glory” in v. 23 also likely includes eternal life (JC, II:126).

Who, then, is the agent by which these vessels of wrath, these unbelieving Jews, are “prepared” for such destruction, whether temporal or eternal? The difference between the term used here in v. 22 and the comparable term in v. 23 (“he prepared in advance”) makes it very likely (contrary to Calvinism) that *they prepared themselves* for such destruction (Godet, 361; MP, 406). The verb in v. 23 is active and has the prefix *pro-*, and clearly means that God himself prepared in advance the vessels of mercy for glory. But in v. 22 the verb seems to be deliberately different. It is either passive voice: “they were prepared,” or (more likely) middle voice: “they prepared themselves” (AG, 419). I.e., they are responsible for their own destruction; by their sin and unbelief and refusal to repent, they sealed their own doom. Even if the agent of preparation were God himself, the lack of the prefix *pro-* (“in advance, beforehand”) (JC, II:126, n. 63), unlike the verb in v. 23, would suggest that God prepared them for destruction only after they manifested their adamant unbelief. The more likely meaning, though, is that they prepared themselves.

The “objects [vessels] of his wrath,” then, are ethnic Israel, viewed in terms of its unbelief. Like a potter God made the nation as such for his glorious purposes, which they did indeed fulfill. But in reference to their individual eternal destiny, the Jews’ personal unbelief makes them the objects of divine wrath. Thus they ultimately become vessels of dishonor and shame (v. 21).

Exactly what is Paul saying about these vessels of wrath prepared for ultimate destruction? He says that God “bore” or “endured” them “with great patience.” This refers to God’s relationship with his chosen people throughout OT history, especially to the fact that he refrained from completely destroying them despite their blatant and repeated idolatry (JC, II:127).

This next point is crucial to our understanding of this whole section. The question is, what is meant by the expression, “choosing to show his wrath and make his power known”? As we have seen, Calvinists usually take this as referring to God’s infallible, purposive will: because God has determined (chosen) to display his wrath and power upon the objects of wrath whom he has prepared for destruction, he patiently withholds this wrath until the time comes when it can be exhibited in its most spectacular intensity. I.e., he exercises patience in the interests of greater wrath. In my judgment this interpretation is atrociously inaccurate and is an insult to the mercy and grace of God. What does the expression mean, then?

First of all, “choosing” is an unacceptable translation for the verb *qevlw* (*thelo*), used here by Paul. Basically it means “to be willing, to want, to desire, to wish” (JC, II:127). At this point Paul is simply saying that God *was willing* or *wanted* to show his wrath and power against Israel.

A second point is that the form of *thelo* is a present participle, indicating that this “wanting” is simultaneous with the action of the main verb, “bore.” But the very nature of a participle requires that we determine from the context just how it relates to the main verb. Here it appears that the participle has either a *causal* or a *concessive* relationship with “bore.” I.e., it means either, (1) “*Because* he was willing to show his wrath and make his power known, *therefore* he bore with great patience the objects of his wrath”; or, (2) “*Although* he wanted to show his wrath and make his power known, *nevertheless* he bore with great patience the objects of his wrath.” For the latter, see the NASB.

In general, Calvinists accept the causal view (JC, II:128). I.e., *because* God wants to display his wrath as impressively as possible, he patiently withholds it until he can do this. Likewise in general, non-Calvinists accept the concessive view. I.e., *even though* God actually wanted to go ahead and abolish the nation of Israel and send unbelieving Israelites to hell, still he bore with them in order to achieve his ultimate saving purposes.

Is it possible to tell from Scripture itself which of these two views is correct? Yes. The key to the right understanding here is the reference to “patience.” Paul says that God bore (endured, put up with) the vessels of wrath — not with just a little patience, but with *great* patience. Why? According to the causal interpretation of *thelo*, accepted by Calvinists, God exercises his patience toward the vessels of wrath for the express purpose of being able to heap even greater wrath upon them (JC, II:128 & n. 64). I believe this view violates the very essence of divine patience (JC, II:128, n. 66). Is patience for the purpose of increasing wrath patience at all? The view also seems to be inconsistent with other Scripture. Romans 2:4 expressly says that God’s kindness and patience are designed to lead to repentance. Second Peter 3:9 says that God is patient because he does not want anyone to perish but for everyone to come to repentance. The Calvinist view of 9:22 makes a travesty of such texts.

I would suggest that the *cause* of God's great patience cannot be found in v. 22. This verse simply asserts the reality of this patience: *even though* God many times wanted to pour out his wrath upon idolatrous and unbelieving Israel, and bring upon them the destruction they deserved, he bore with them with great patience. *Why* he did so is stated only in v. 23 (JC, II:129 &, n. 67).

What is this purpose? "To make the riches of his glory known to the objects [vessels] of his mercy." In continuity with everything we have seen in ch. 9 thus far, we take these vessels of mercy to be the spiritual Israel alluded to in 9:6b; and in view of the reference to the Gentiles in v. 24, we take this specifically to refer to the NT church. For hundreds of years God endured with great patience the unbelieving multitudes of ethnic Israel because it was his purpose to produce through them, in the fullness of time, the true Israel.

It was certainly the case that any of these unbelieving Israelites along the way could have "circumcised their hearts" (Jer 4:4) and turned in penitent faith toward the gracious God; and many did so. But strictly speaking God did not exercise his great patience toward OT Israel just for the purpose of allowing time for individual Jews to repent. The fact is, according to v. 22, he actually *wanted* to wipe them all out. What prevented him from doing so, and what caused him to be patient, was his determination to accomplish his final historical purpose for them as a nation: the establishment of the church of Jesus the Messiah consisting of both Jews and Gentiles who accept the gospel (JC, II:130). Collectively they form the church, which is the new and true Israel, or the Israel which is identified by spiritual rather than physical criteria.

How shall we understand "the riches of his glory" which he makes known to these vessels of mercy? Some take this to mean that God's purpose is to display *his own* glory by bestowing salvation upon the elect (Murray, 2:35). The NIV might be taken in this sense in that it refers to making the riches of God's glory "*known to* the objects of his mercy." I believe it is better, though, to interpret "the riches of his glory" to mean the riches of salvation as bestowed "*upon* vessels of mercy" (NASB, emphasis added). The preposition *epi* is better translated "upon" than "to." Thus it is God's purpose to manifest the glorious riches of his salvation by lavishly bestowing them upon the new Israel.

Does this "glory" refer to eschatological glorification, the final blessings of heaven itself? It certainly must include this, since "glory" most often has this specific reference (e.g., 2:7,10; 5:2; 8:18,21,30; Col 1:27). But it must not be limited to the glory of the end times; from the very beginning of the Christian life God pours "the riches of his glory" into the vessels of his mercy. This exact phrase is used in Eph 3:16 to refer to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit within us. See also 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 3:13; Phil 4:19; Col 1:11; 1 Thess 2:12.

In what sense are the vessels of mercy "prepared in advance for glory"? Here the verb "prepared in advance" (proetoimavzw, *proetoimazo*) is different from the verb translated "prepared" (katartivzw, *katartizo*) in v. 22. Because the latter is middle or passive voice, we may conclude that the vessels of wrath prepared themselves for destruction. But in v. 23 the word is active voice and no doubt means that God is the one who has prepared the vessels of mercy for glory. Also, unlike v. 22, the verb in v. 23 has the prefix *pro-*, which means that God prepared them "in advance" or "beforehand."

If "prepared in advance for glory" refers to the final glory of heaven, then this statement is no different from 8:28-30. I.e., whom he foreknew would respond favorably to his gracious promises, he predestined to be in heaven (see JC, 1:502-514).

But it is possible that "prepared in advance" refers to the plan that God had begun to work out from the time he called Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the plan whereby he would use the ethnic people of Israel to lay the groundwork for the establishment of the church. That he prepared them "for glory" would then mean that he had already determined that he would pour out the riches of salvation upon all who accepted the Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile. See Eph 2:10; 1 Pet 1:2 (JC, II:131).

In other words, the church is the ultimate objective of God's advance preparation; its members are the vessels of mercy God "prepared in advance for glory." Every time a sinner is converted, God "make[s] the riches of his glory known" by pouring them out upon the convert.

We must not lose sight of Paul's main point, which is to declare God's faithfulness in his dealings with the Jews. As he has insisted all along, the members of ethnic Israel did not have to be personal believers as a prerequisite for being used to carry out the divine plan. Even as vessels of wrath, they were used collectively as an instrument for bringing the church into existence. This was God's purpose, and as the objector in v. 19 rightly observes, no one can resist his purposive will.

It is important to see that the ultimate purpose of God is not wrath, but mercy. He used vessels of wrath (unbelieving Israel) to accomplish this purpose, but the purpose itself is to make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy. And here is the most glorious truth of all: no unbelieving Jew — no individual vessel of wrath — needs to remain as such.

Though the nation in general remains under God's curse because of unbelief, any individual Jew can respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ and *become* a vessel of mercy! After all, the gospel is "first for the Jew" (1:16).

9:24 . . . even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? The main point of this verse has already been set forth in the above discussion, namely, that the vessels of mercy for which God had long been preparing would include not only Jews but Gentiles as well (JC, II:132).

Once the advance preparation through ethnic Israel was completed, God "called" (kalew, *kaleo*) from the larger masses of Jews and Gentiles those who would receive his mercy. This is not the Calvinist "effectual call," which is identical with the doctrine of irresistible grace (JC, II:132, n. 68); it is rather the call that is extended to all sinners through the preaching of the gospel, though it is accepted by only a few (see JC, 1:83-84, 500-501, 512-513).

The word "from" is *ek* (*ek*), which can be more forcefully translated "out of." Thus Paul is here identifying the vessels of mercy as "called-out ones," which is etymologically related to the NT word for "church," which is *ekklesía* (*ekkle-sia*). This comes from the same two words used here in v. 24, *ek* and *kaleo*. This is completely consistent with what was said above, that Paul's whole point in this chapter is the way God used ethnic Israel to produce spiritual Israel, the church (JC, II:132-133).

4. PROPHETIC CONFIRMATION OF GOD'S PURPOSE (9:25-29)

This section does not add any new content to Paul's argument. It is a series of quotations from Hosea and Isaiah, cited to provide prophetic confirmation of God's purpose for Israel as it culminates in the birth of the NT church (JC, II:133). These quotations, especially those from Isaiah, show that the present state of Israel's unbelief and accursedness was no surprise to God, and that his original purpose had not failed (JC, II:133). The nation itself was always intended to be a means to an end; the end itself is spiritual Israel, which consists of both the believing remnant from old Israel and all believers from among the Gentiles. This end, and therefore God's purpose for Israel, have been accomplished, in fulfillment of these prophecies.

9:25-26 As he says in Hosea: "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," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" A major question is whether or not Paul really intends to apply these quotes from Hosea to the calling of the Gentiles. This is problematic because Hosea's prophecy was originally addressed to Jews, specifically to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. Still most interpreters believe that Paul is applying the Hosea texts to the evangelization of the Gentiles (JC, II:134).

But how could Paul justify applying the Hosea prophecies to the Gentiles? The consensus seems to be that the ten "lost" tribes' permanent exile has so intermingled them with the Gentiles that the evangelization of the one group will necessarily involve the evangelization of the other (Godet, 365). These Jews had become "not loved" and "not my people" through the judgment of the exile; the Gentiles were "not loved" and "not my people" by nature, so to speak. Thus in the NT age, when the church goes into all the world, the gospel appeal reaches Jew and Gentile alike, and the words of Hosea take on a new and expanded meaning (JC, II:135).

In view of these considerations, in my judgment it is proper to apply the Hosea prophecies to both Jews and Gentiles.

In v. 25 Paul introduces what is actually a paraphrase of Hosea 2:23 thus: "As he says in Hosea." The "he" is God (JC, II:135). For God to punish Israelites by stripping them of their status as "my people" was a severe blow; being the people of God was their greatest treasure. Thus the messianic promise that God would one day bestow this title upon them again would have special meaning for Jews. Gentiles who have never had this status to begin with may not at first realize what a great promise this is. To be "God's people" means to come into a special family relationship with him (see 8:14-17) (JC, II:135-136).

The word "call" in both v. 25 and v. 26 does not refer to the gospel call but to the giving of a new name or title (JC, II:136).

Verse 26 is a citation of Hosea 1:10; its main point is the same as v. 25 and Hos 2:23 (JC, II:136).

Paul says, citing Hosea, that this calling (naming) will happen "in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people.'" This probably refers to the Gentile world. As applied to exiled and scattered Jews it means that they do not have to return to their "homeland" in order to become God's sons once again. Through the preaching of the gospel adoption into God's family takes place in whatever nation one is found, whether one be Jew or Gentile.

9:27-28 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." Paul

takes this quote from Isa 10:22-23 and specifically applies it to Israel. He says that Isaiah “cries out” this prophecy, indicating that the words were spoken with fervent emotion.

Though his message surely applies to the whole of Israel, Isaiah’s ministry, unlike that of Hosea, was to the southern kingdom (JC, II:136). The prophet is assuring Israel that even though they must suffer conquest and captivity, at least a remnant will survive and return to the Lord. But at the same time, the fact that only a remnant will be saved means that the rest will be destroyed.

Isaiah 10:21 says, “A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God” (JC, II:137). Isaiah speaks here of a *spiritual* return — a returning to the Lord. This is the way Paul understands it; thus in v. 27b he words the promise, “The remnant *will be saved*.” He sees Isaiah’s prophecy as being fulfilled through the preaching of the gospel and the entry of many Jews into spiritual Israel, the church, through their conversion to Christ (JC, II:137).

That the prophet Isaiah himself declares that only a remnant would thus be saved is a primary vindication of Paul’s main point (JC, II:137). Everything that God promised to Israel as a nation *was* fulfilled. But the remnant prophecy shows that this great nation was chosen only for service, not for salvation; and the fact that only a small proportion were saved was in no way contrary to God’s promises and God’s faithfulness (JC, II:137).

The remnant doctrine is both a promise and a judgment. As a promise, it is an assurance that *at least* a remnant of Israel will be saved. There will always be an Israel, at least a spiritual Israel. But as a judgment, it is a solemn recognition that *only* a remnant will be saved (JC, II:138).

V. 28 “explains how it will come about that only a remnant of Israel will be saved” (Cranfield, 2:502). It will be the result of God’s *logvo* (*logos*), translated “sentence” in the NIV. This probably refers to the decree of destruction of which Isaiah speaks (JC, II:138).

The Lord himself will carry out this decree of judgment upon the nation “with speed and finality.” These last words are an attempt to translate two participles (JC, II:138 & n. 69). The first word (*synteleo* ~) looks to the past and means that in carrying out this sentence God is accomplishing an existing purpose, bringing it to completion, and fulfilling it completely. The other word (*syntemno* ~) looks to the future and means that in carrying out this sentence God is cutting something off and bringing it to an end; it will not continue to exist in the future. In my opinion this means that the establishment of the remnant (spiritual Israel) marks the end of God’s dealing with Israel as a nation; his purpose for ethnic Israel is now completed, and they are cut off as his special people. From this point on his focus is upon spiritual Israel.

The words translated “on earth” probably should be translated “upon the land,” and refer to the land of Israel (JC, II:139). But here “land” actually stands for ethnic Israel or physical Israelites as such.

9:29 It is just as Isaiah said previously: “Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.” This last quotation, from Isaiah 1:9, reemphasizes both the seriousness of God’s judgment upon unbelieving Israel and the divine provision for preserving at least a remnant of his people. In Scripture the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is a type of final and decisive judgment (JC, II:139, n. 71). Thus without the remnant, Israel would have become like these two cities: extinct. By preserving only the remnant, God brought a judgment just short of this upon Israel.

“The Lord Almighty” preserved this remnant. Both Isaiah and Paul actually say “the Lord of Hosts,” contrary to the NIV. “Hosts” refers to all the heavenly or angelic hosts (JC, II:139).

The word “descendants” would be better translated “seed.” The word connotes not a relationship to what is past (i.e., to one’s ancestors), but a preparation for the future. The purpose for leaving behind a few survivors is to reseed and replant for the future. The “new growth” that springs forth from this seed is the new spiritual Israel, the church (JC, II:140 & n. 72).

The Lord “left us” this remnant. The verb used here means “to allow to remain” (AG, 214-215). Though the Lord carried out his sentence of destruction upon the nation in general, he allowed this seed-remnant to remain (JC, II:140).

In what sense did *the Lord* leave this remnant? He left it in the sense that he “bore with great patience the objects of his wrath” (v. 22) until the time that he was ready for the spiritual Israel to come into existence (JC, II:140).

This brings the first main section of Rom 9–11 to a conclusion. Paul has shown that God has not been unfaithful to Israel nor treated them unfairly. He has kept every promise he made to them, and fulfilled every purpose he had for them as a nation.

The one question raised in this section that has yet to be addressed is the lost state of the great majority of the Jews, or more specifically, who is responsible for their lostness? The objector raised the question in v. 19a, “Then why does God still blame us?” The implication is that somehow God is responsible for the Jews’ rejection of their Messiah; therefore they should not be blamed and punished. This is the issue that Paul will address in the next section.

III. ISRAEL'S CHOICE OF LAW RATHER THAN GRACE (9:30–10:21)

There is considerable agreement that 9:30–10:21 forms the next major section of 9–11, but how it relates to the previous section is a matter of dispute (JC, II:141, n. 73). A common view is that ch. 9 explains Israel's lostness in terms of God's sovereign decision, while ch. 10 explains it as the result of Israel's own unbelief. For Calvinists especially, ch. 9 presents the picture of a sovereign God who unilaterally and unconditionally chooses which individuals he will save and which he will send to hell, while ch. 10 presents him as giving human beings the choice of whether to believe or not to believe, with salvation being conditioned on this choice. This seeming contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a paradox with no ready explanation (JC, II:141).

In my judgment the point of these two sections is something quite different. Paul's main purpose in 9–11, as discussed earlier, is to vindicate God's faithfulness in view of (a) his promises to Israel and (b) Israel's lostness. Chs. 9 and 10 present two separate but related reasons why this situation does not violate God's faithfulness. First (ch. 9), his faithfulness is not violated because his promises to the nation as a whole involved only their role of service and not their salvation (JC, II:142). The second reason (ch. 10) why God's faithfulness is not violated by this situation is because Israel's lostness (their exclusion from spiritual Israel) is the result of their own free choice of law rather than grace as the way of salvation (JC, II:142). Paul makes it clear that any and all Jews could have been saved if they had accepted God's gift of righteousness on his gracious terms instead of trying to attain salvation through their own works or personal righteousness. Such saving grace had always been available to individual Jews, based on God's loving offer of forgiveness of sins; but the offer was usually spurned, as the gospel of Christ itself came to be. In other words, it is the Jews themselves, not God, who have been unfaithful (JC, II:142-143).

A. PERSONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS VERSUS THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD (9:30–10:3)

This paragraph presents the essence of this section in terms of the concept of righteousness, i.e., the righteousness on the basis of which one is accepted by God. The Jews were lost, says Paul, because they sought acceptance by God through their own personal righteousness or law-keeping, which can never be good enough. They rejected the gift of God's righteousness, which is the only hope for salvation.

"God's righteousness" (10:3) in this context is the same as the "righteousness from God" that is revealed in the gospel (1:17). It is not the attribute of God by which he is personally righteous, but rather a gift of righteousness that God offers to sinners, thus allowing him to accept them as righteous even though in reality they are not. Specifically, it is Jesus Christ's payment of the penalty of the law in our place (JC, I:116-120).

Though the Jews are the main focus of this section, the Gentiles are mentioned here by way of contrast. The very thing the Jews were seeking but failed to attain, the Gentiles attained even though they were not seeking it (9:30-31) (JC, II:143).

1. THE REASON FOR THE GENTILES' ACCEPTANCE (9:30)

9:30 What then shall we say? Sometimes when Paul asks this question, he does so to introduce a false inference or idea, which he then proceeds to refute (e.g., 6:1; 7:7; 9:14). But here it serves simply to introduce the new section. What follows is not an objector's question but Paul's own teaching (as in 8:31; 11:7).

"What then shall we say" — about what? What has triggered this question? No doubt it is the whole of the previous section that is in view. I.e., what shall we say about the lostness of most Jews (9:3,22, 28), especially in view of the fact that even some Gentiles (!) are being saved (9:25-26)?

This is Paul's answer, **That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, . . .** (See JC, II:144, n. 74.) This refers not to all Gentiles, but only to those who accept the gospel. What is the righteousness they have obtained? Most agree that Paul is not speaking of moral righteousness or righteous character, but rather a "righteous status in God's sight" (Cranfield, 2:506), or a right standing with God (e.g., Hendriksen, 2:333; Morris, 374). It is not the same

as justification (contra Lard, 317; DeWelt, 159), but is rather the result of it. On the basis of his gracious act of justifying (declaring or counting righteous), believing Gentiles obtain their right standing before God.

Whether righteousness be taken as right moral character or as a right standing before God, it was characteristic of the Gentiles that they sought for neither. Regarding the former, there were no doubt some exceptions, but in general the pagan world was noted for its wickedness (1:18-32; Acts 14:16; 17:30; Eph 4:17-19). But this very fact shows that the Gentiles were not striving for the latter, either. This is true because without special revelation the only known means of being right with God is earnest moral striving; but as just noted, this was not typical of the Gentile world.

But even though they were not pursuing a right standing before God, they obtained it anyway! The words “pursue” and “obtain” go together. Literally they can refer to pursuing a quarry and catching it, or running after a prize in a race and winning it. Figuratively they refer to seeking after or pursuing a goal, and attaining it. What is so unusual is that the Gentiles attained this goal or prize without even seeking it. This refers to the fact that under the New Covenant God is actively seeking Gentiles to be his people through the worldwide preaching of the gospel. By accepting the gospel when it is presented to them, Gentiles obtain this right standing before God (JC, II:145, n. 75).

Specifically, Paul says, the Gentiles obtained **a righteousness that is by faith . . .** That is, they obtained a right standing with God based on the free gift of God’s own righteousness, a gift which they received by putting their trust in Christ’s saving work (1:17; 3:21-22; Phil 3:9). “Righteousness by faith” is a shorthand expression for the grace system as a whole and is similar to “justified by faith” in 3:28 (JC, I:267-268) (JC, II:145, n. 76).

2. THE REASON FOR THE JEWS’ LOSTNESS (9:31-33)

9:31 [B]ut Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Here is the tragic irony. The Gentiles did not pursue righteousness but obtained it anyway; Israel pursued it but did not attain it. “Israel” refers to the physical nation in general. “Pursued” is a present participle (literally, “pursuing”), to which both the NASB and the NIV give a purely descriptive meaning (JC, II:145). Another possibility, which I favor, is that the participle is concessive: “*although* they pursued.” Although Israel, unlike the Gentiles, vigorously pursued a law of righteousness, they did not attain it.

The difficult part of this verse is the expression, “a law of righteousness” (νομον δικαιοσυνης, *nomon dikaiosyne* -s). Why didn’t Paul just say “righteousness,” making the language parallel with v. 30? Why did he say “*law* of righteousness”? (See JC, II:146.)

First, the best understanding is that “law” here refers to the Law of Moses, which the Jews obviously pursued and after which they hastened with the greatest of zeal (2:17-20; 10:2) (JC, II:146-147). But in what sense is the Law of Moses a law of *righteousness*? We should remember that righteousness as such means “conformity to the proper and relevant standard or norm” (see JC, 1:116). Thus any form of God’s law for mankind (heart-engraved [2:15], Mosaic, New Covenant) is a law of righteousness in the sense that it is the norm or standard to which all human beings in their respective contexts are obligated to conform. The Law of Moses was the norm by which the righteousness of the Jews was to be measured (JC, II:147). As such it was meant to be meticulously and sincerely obeyed, which was the professed goal of every Israelite (see Ps 119) (JC, II:147, n. 78).

Paul’s lament is that, although the Jews pursued their law of righteousness, they did not attain it (JC, II:147 &, n. 79). Contrary to the Gentiles, who did obtain righteousness, the Jews did not arrive at their goal (JC, II:147).

Exactly what did the Jews hope to gain by pursuing the law of righteousness, i.e., by conforming their lives and conduct to the Law of Moses? Not just righteousness in the sense of perfect moral character, but righteousness in the sense of right standing before God — the very thing the Gentiles attained without seeking it. But why did the Jews not attain it?

9:32 Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works (See JC, II:147, n. 80.) Here is a point that must not be overlooked: it was possible for the Jews to obtain a right standing with God by pursuing the Law of Moses, their “law of righteousness,” as long as they pursued it in the right manner. Of course, if anyone had obeyed it perfectly, he would have been justified before God for that very reason; but Paul has already shown that no Jew ever accomplished this (2:1-3:20), and he is not just repeating that point here. Rather, Paul says the reason the Jews did not succeed was that they did not pursue their law “by faith.” This implies that they *could* have pursued it by faith; and if they had done so, they *would* have obtained the same righteous standing with God that the Gentiles did. In fact, we must assume that a large number of Jews throughout OT history *did* in fact follow after the law by faith and attain righteousness thereby (11:4), though most did not.

But how is it possible for the Jews to follow after the Law of Moses *by faith*? The most obvious way is that the Jews living in the Christian era can put their trust in the very one to whom their law points, namely, Jesus. But what of those who lived in pre-Christian generations? How could they pursue the *law* of righteousness *by faith*? Doesn't this sound like a contradiction?

It is not a contradiction. The Law of Moses as a law code was unique, in that it contained not just moral and legal precepts to be obeyed, but also religious provisions that embodied the very essence of grace (i.e., forgiveness of sins). Pre-Christian Jews did not know Jesus as such, but they knew that they were sinners and law-breakers as measured by all the moral and legal requirements of their law, and they knew from the laws of sacrifice the principle of atonement via substitution. Thus they knew that their sin and idolatry could be forgiven when God's promises of mercy displayed in the sacrifices were embraced by faith (see 3:21). Those Jews who trusted in the gospel aspects of the Law of Moses rather than its legal aspects are the ones who obtained a righteous status before God. In this sense the Jews' law was not an enemy of faith, but was in fact designed to engender faith (JC, II:148-149).

A biblical example of one who pursued the law by faith is the publican or tax collector in Jesus' parable in Luke 18:9-14. In the temple as he prayed for acceptance by God, he was overwhelmed by his unworthiness and cried simply, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus declared that this man went home "justified before God." Though this story may have been fictional, it shows how any Jew at any time in OT history was able to attain by faith a righteous standing with God, as guided by the law (JC, II:149).

Many were thus driven, but most were not. Indeed, most were like the Pharisee in the same parable. Instead of pursuing the law of righteousness by faith, Israel as a whole pursued it "by works" (JC, II:149, n. 81). Instead of simply trusting the law's manifested grace as the source of their righteous standing before God, they trusted that their own ability to obey its precepts would make them worthy of acceptance by God (JC, II:150). Instead of depending on God's forgiving grace, they trusted that they had achieved a satisfactory degree of personal righteousness, "as if the accumulation of works-righteousness were God's way of salvation" (Stott, 276).

What Israel did, in effect, was to transform their law *code* into a law *system*. As a law code, the Law of Moses was a simple set of commands to which the Israelites were obligated to conform their lives and conduct. To use it as such was to use it properly (3:31). But the moment they began to regard such obedience as the means or basis for gaining acceptance by God, their law code became the centerpiece in the law system as a way of salvation (JC, I:128). But this is exactly why Israel was lost: the law system cannot save sinners (1:18-3:20).

They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." This is a reference to Yahweh's warning to Israel in Isa 8:13-15. "The LORD Almighty," he said, "is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." Though he will be a sanctuary or place of safety, at the same time "for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." Many of the Jews "will stumble; they will fall and be broken."

Though 9:33 as well as other NT references show that the "stumbling stone" ultimately applies to Jesus Christ, originally the stone was Yahweh as such. To Jews in Old Covenant times, God presented himself as a sanctuary, i.e., as the holy place where one could find refuge from all his enemies (see 1 Kgs 1:50-51; 2:28-29). As such he placed himself squarely in the path of his people (Isa 65:1-2). Thus if they refused to take shelter in his grace, they ran headlong into him and crashed against him and fell (JC, II:150). Thus it was with all Jews throughout OT history who pursued the law of righteousness by works instead of by faith.

Thus it is no surprise that when Yahweh came in the flesh, the Jews of that generation stumbled against him as well. They were conditioned to do so by the chronic misuse of the law by their ancestors (JC, II:151).

9:33 As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." This verse expands the "stumbling stone" concept and implicitly applies it to Christ. I say "implicitly" because Christ is not specifically mentioned in the verse, yet these same OT quotes are applied to him elsewhere in the NT (JC, II:151, n. 82). In fact, the second part of this verse, a quote from Isa 28:16b, is explicitly applied to Christ in 10:11 (JC, II:151).

"As it is written" is a common NT way of introducing material from the OT, which in this case is a composite of two passages from Isaiah. "See, I lay in Zion a stone" is from Isa 28:16; "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall" is from Isa 8:14; and the rest of the verse is from Isa 28:16 again. The way Paul combines them is an ingenious blending of the two texts. Isa 8:14 presents Yahweh as both a refuge (sanctuary) and a stone of judgment, with the emphasis being on the latter. Isa 28:16 concentrates on the stone as a place of refuge and safety. Paul simply combines the two and presents the one stone as the source of both judgment and promise.

One reason for saying v. 33 refers to Jesus is that, while in Isa 8:14 Yahweh himself is the stone, in Isa 28:16 Yahweh is the one who lays the stone. That the latter is a messianic prophecy is indicated by the fact that Matt 16:16-18 is clearly

based on Isa 28:14-19. Christ's person and work as summed up in Peter's confession are the foundation stone on which the church is built, and all the forces of Hades (=Sheol in Isa 28:15, 18) cannot overpower it. Thus most scholars agree that the stone of stumbling in 9:32-33 is Jesus, especially in his role as the crucified Messiah (see 1 Cor 1:23).

But how can Paul apply both Isaiah texts to Jesus? In Isaiah 28:16, to be sure, the stone does appear to be the Messiah, but in 8:14 the stone is Yahweh himself. So how can they both refer to Jesus? The answer is simple: "Christ is God!" (Hendriksen, 2:335). The Messiah-Stone "is therefore Jehovah in His final manifestation" (Godet, 369; see Rom 10:9,13). This does not mean that God the Father and Jesus Christ are one and the same person; it means only that Yahweh in the OT revelation is the entire Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus is "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." This does not mean that God *wants* anyone to stumble over him or that he *intended* the Jews to fall because of him (Lard, 319). The stumbling is a *result*, not a purpose (JC, II:152).

In what sense does anyone stumble or fall over Jesus? The verb for "stumble" (v. 32) is *proskoptw* (*proskopto*); it means literally "to strike or bump against, to stumble against or over"; figuratively it means "to give offense, to take offense at, to reject." The noun, *proskomma* (*proskomma*), is used in this verse (JC, II:152). The word for "fall" is the noun *skavndalon* (*skandalon*) (JC, II:152-153). A *skandalon* is something which one opposes or to which one takes offense only to his ruin and destruction. In this light it is easy to see how Jesus is a stumbling stone. Those who oppose him or who take offense at the gospel of the cross fall into eternal ruin and death. This is what happened to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23), and it can happen to anyone else.

But this is not the whole story. God lays in Zion a stone; some fall over him, but "the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." This part of v. 33 is based on Isa 28:16b, where the Hebrew verb in the latter clause seems to be "will not be in haste," or "will not be in a hurry" (NASB margin) (JC, II:153). The passive verb used by Paul means "to be disgraced, to be put to shame," and speaks more of the reason for such panic or hasty flight than the fleeing itself. The idea is that those who take refuge upon the Rock by trusting in him will never have to slink away in shame for having made a humiliating decision (JC, II:153, n. 83).

In these three verses (31-33), then, Paul vindicates the faithfulness of God by declaring that Israel as a whole is responsible for its own lost condition. The essence of their failure was that they trusted in themselves rather than in God's promises and in their own Messiah; they pursued acceptance with God by works rather than by faith; they chose law rather than grace.

Such a path to perdition is not limited to the Jews, of course. Anyone living in the New Covenant era can respond to the New Covenant revelation in exactly the same way, i.e., by zealously pursuing its commands in an effort to win God's approval on the basis of such works. The fate of those who do so will be the same as Israel's.