

# ROMANS 9

## COMMENTARY

**1 I am telling the truth in Messiah, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Messiah for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,**

**chs. 9-11** Romans chs. 9-11 are some of the most important Scripture passages for the entire Messianic movement, as they convey a largely salvation-historical narrative to what God is doing with His Jewish people, the nations, and the final restoration of Israel. Many studies and commentaries on Romans, however, have considered chs. 9-11 to widely be out of place in terms of the preceding discussions Paul has had. History has borne out many Romans resources that have had detailed and intensive examinations of chs. 1-8, but less-than-detailed examinations of chs. 9-16, often coming from the view that the Epistle to the Romans is mainly a doctrinal treatise rather than a letter to ancient Believers. And concurrent with this, while the issues of the First Century Jewish people, the inclusion of the nations in the Kingdom of God, and the culmination of Israel's salvation are in view in chs. 9-11—history has also borne out how many of the questions brought to Paul's word in chs. 9-11 are not those of the First Century, but instead those of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Protestant Reformers. Far from probing the significance of the Apostle Paul being completely distraught and in agony over the widescale rejection committed by a great many of his fellow Jews toward Yeshua, Romans chs. 9-11 are often read as an abstract of individuals predestined to either salvation or damnation.

That many Romans commentaries of the past have not really discussed as much as they should have beyond ch. 8, chs. 9-16 are too commonly read in the abstract, rather than the concrete. Ben Witherington III observes, "It is a very serious error indeed to treat these chapters as an afterthought, unrelated discussion, or mere appendix to chs. 1-8. It is nearer to the mark to call it the climax of the theological portion of the letter. It is an argument for the defense of both God and of Israel and as such is meant to refute certain assumptions Gentiles in Rome seem to be making about God and Israel, and about Israel's future."<sup>1</sup> While not all past examinations of chs. 9-16 are in error, an abstract reading of the proceeding contents of Paul's letter—rather than approaching what he is about to say as involving instructions to direct the theological thoughts and spiritual actions of the Roman Believers—has created many difficulties for today's still-developing and emerging Messianic movement to interact with many Christian laypeople. Some corrections need to be issued by more closely reading the text of chs. 9-11 to the end of Paul's letter to be sure, but some corrections also need to be made by better approaching the text with First Century questions and controversies in mind. The main issue of chs. 9-11 is not what to do with individual salvation, but rather what has happened with a widescale, corporate Jewish rejection of Yeshua the Messiah. C.E.B. Cranfield has been right to acknowledge,

"[T]he very reliability of God's purpose as the ground of Christian hope is called in question by the exclusion of the majority of Jews. If the truth is that God's purpose with Israel has been frustrated,

<sup>1</sup> Witherington, 237.

then what sort of a basis for Christian hope is God's purpose? And if God's love for Israel (cf., e.g., Deut. 7:7f; Jer 31:3) has ceased, what reliance can be placed on Paul's conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike various evangelical Christian readers of Romans chs. 9-11, for whom issues like the salvation of the Jewish people or support of the State of Israel, while important, tend to remain outside of their immediate sphere of influence—the issues depicted by Romans chs. 9-11 sit in the literal front of Messianic people every week in their congregations. What is God going to do with His Jewish people? What is God going to do with the nations? How do we get to the point of “all Israel will be saved” (11:26)?

Romans chs. 9-11 presents a salvation-historical framework for what God intends for the Kingdom of Israel, as humanity will reach a point of culmination at the Second Coming of Israel's Messiah. This section of Paul's letter has been commonly interpreted in the Reformed theological tradition as teaching about the sovereignty of God, and while there are issues addressed regarding God's control over events, some perspective changes do need to be interjected regarding the election or choice of corporate Israel. Passages, which have commonly been interpreted as involving individuals (i.e., 9:13; 17), may actually be shown to be dealing more with corporate entities when the Tanach passages quoted are decompressed a little.

Romans chs. 9-11 also admonished First Century Greek and Roman Believers—and by extension all non-Jewish Believers since—not to be arrogant or haughty toward a Jewish people which have widely rejected their Messiah. There are certainly questions to be considered regarding Jewish and Christian relations throughout history. Closer to what we see happening in the Messianic movement today, there are issues to be considered involving the wide number of evangelical Believers who have embraced their Hebrew/Hebraic Roots and a life of Torah obedience, and their increasingly complex relationship with Messianic Jews and the Messianic Jewish movement.

It is clear enough from a fair survey of Romans chs. 9-11 that the material was addressed to both Jewish and non-Jewish Messiah followers in Rome—as both would have heard it read aloud in fellowship gatherings—although some specific segments may seem to oscillate more toward the Jewish Believers, and others more toward the non-Jewish Believers. As we prepare to analyze chs. 9-11 as Messianic people, in addition to probably needing some reorientation of various passages, fine-tuning on various issues, and closer attention to detail—**we will need to consciously consider the part that our Messianic faith community may indeed play in reaching the goal of Israel's restoration.** What have we clearly gotten right in our congregations and assemblies? What changes do we need to be considering for the future?

**9:1-2** It is not difficult to see that the Apostle Paul is absolutely distraught over what he has been witnessing in the First Century regarding the majority of his fellow Jews: “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit” (v. 1, NRSV). This is not the first time that Paul has appealed to his conscience in his ministry activities (2 Corinthians 1:12). V. 1 is an example of how Paul has previously asserted, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (8:16). Along with this, the Holy Spirit has apparently been able to communicate to Paul, most unfortunately, that many of his fellow Jews are not children of God because they have rejected Yeshua as Messiah.

Paul says, “I am greatly pained and my heart is constantly distressed” (v. 2, Goodspeed New Testament), paraphrased by The Message as, “It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free of it. I'm not exaggerating,” and by the Phillips New Testament with, “there is something that makes me feel very depressed, like a pain that never leaves me.” We might think of the ministry of Jeremiah here,

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<sup>2</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, 447.

often regarded as the weeping prophet (i.e., Jeremiah 4:19; 6:24; 9:10). Paul's reference to "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (RSV), is in all likelihood taken from the Book of Isaiah, speaking of redeemed Israel:

"And the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:10).

"So the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, and everlasting joy *will be* on their heads. They will obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 51:11).

The problem, that really grips the Apostle Paul, is that which is stated in John 1:11: "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him." Even with Paul having a major ministry outreach to the nations in the Mediterranean basin, Paul never stopped thinking about the redemption of his fellow Jews, nor did he ever cease declaring the good news of Israel's Messiah to them. As F.F. Bruce observes, "The ingathering of the Gentiles, no matter on how extensive a scale, could never compensate for the defection of his nation, which caused him such unceasing mental anguish."<sup>3</sup> *A widescale Jewish rejection of Israel's Messiah was hardly something to rejoice over!* Yet, these were attitudes that various non-Jewish Believers in Rome **were in danger of adopting**. Cranfield appropriately summarizes,

"[Paul] recognized that the very integrity and authenticity of his apostleship to the Gentiles would be called in question, were he able to give up his fellow-Israelites, were he not to suffer grief so long as they continued in unbelief; and that he regarded it as of vital importance that the [Believers] to whom he was writing, both Jewish and Gentile, should know if this grief of his, because for them too such a grief was the only attitude with regard to the Jews' continuing unbelief that would be consistent with faith."<sup>4</sup>

Much of the backdrop of Paul writing the Romans after all, involved how most of the Jewish Believers had been expelled from Rome per the Edict of Claudius (cf. Acts 18:2), they had been returning to the city and to the fellowship gatherings of Messiah followers—and with the non-Jewish Believers now outnumbering them, tensions were present. Paul has to defuse the non-Jewish Believers from embracing any prideful attitudes toward their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters. Likewise, Paul has to reason with his fellow Jewish Believers, much of the problem that has arisen per a widescale Jewish rejection of Yeshua.

**9:3** Paul contemplates a severe action, revealing how internally distressed he is about his fellow Jews: "I could wish myself actually under God's curse and separated from the Messiah, if it would help my brothers, my own flesh and blood" (CJB). The verb *euchomēn* (εὐχόμενος) is actually an imperfect middle indicative, being more specifically rendered as "I was praying" (Brown and Comfort)<sup>5</sup> or "I would pray" (TLV). There is dispute among interpreters as to whether or not Paul had actually prayed to God about being cut off from salvation in Yeshua, to save his fellow Jews, *or* if this is just a hypothetical action. With such actions being described, though, the Apostle Paul hardly believed himself disconnected from his fellow Jews and their welfare. Paul believed his ministry activities to be innately tied to the salvation of his people, and directly associated with the completion of Tanach prophecy.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, 172.

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, 454.

<sup>5</sup> Brown and Comfort, 555.

How severe is Paul's thought of v. 3? "For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (American Standard Version). The term *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα) would widely regard, "**that which has been cursed, cursed, accursed**" (BDAG),<sup>6</sup> or even "*anything devoted to evil, an accursed thing*" (LS).<sup>7</sup> The NIV renders v. 3 with "cursed and cut off." It is most appropriate to consider Paul's statement to be similar to that of Moses' word to the Lord after the Ancient Israelites were caught worshipping the golden calf: "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!" (Exodus 32:31-32). Moses appealed to the Lord not to eliminate the people of Israel, but rather to condemn him instead, which He did not permit. And in some ways, Paul's action of wishing to be accursed is mimicking of the Messiah Himself, who bore the sins of Israel and the world, so that people might be fully reconciled to their Creator. In the estimation of James R. Edwards,

"Nothing was more dreaded for a Jew than banishment from the elect community of Israel. For Paul separation from Christ was worse than banishment because it meant separation from eternal salvation. The idea reveals the extent to which Paul thought 'messianically.' Had not Jesus himself become accursed *for the sake of* Israel's salvation (Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21)?"<sup>8</sup>

Paul's First Century audience (much less modern readers) could not have fully known what was in Paul's mind or thoughts, for him to contemplate, "I have actually reached the pitch of wishing myself cut off from Christ if it meant that they could be won for God" (Phillips New Testament). Is this a literal desire, or are Paul's thoughts more metaphorical? What we know for certain is that **Paul was that heartbroken over many of his fellow Jews not wanting anything to do with Yeshua**. Colin G. Kruse directs, "he may have come to realize that the Lord would not accept such a request. Even so, the fact that he had once contemplated praying or had once actually prayed in this way underlines the greatness of the anguish he felt in light of his kinsfolk's rejection of their messiah."<sup>9</sup> We do not know to what extent Paul's guilt in having once persecuted the *ekklēsia* (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13) played in these words. We can know that few people in religious history, in the First Century or the Twenty-First Century, have been willing to even contemplate the thought of being terminated from salvation to save any group of people. Paul's agonizing for the widescale Jewish rejection of Yeshua, is hardly the attitude—to any significant degree—that has been demonstrated throughout centuries of Christian interaction with the Jewish people. Yet, the presence of the Messianic movement, does indicate that closer attention to Paul's deep concern will be increasingly more present.

**4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.**

**9:4** In spite of a widescale rejection of their Messiah, Paul's fellow Jewish people are still to be honored and highly respected, as they are the original recipients of God's Torah, His covenants, promises, and things such as the Temple worship—and the natural distinction which goes along with it: "[they] are Israelites. To them belong the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the *Torah* and the Temple service and the promises" (TLV). Paul's assertion in v. 4 sounds very similar to m.*Avot* 1:2 in the Mishnah: "Simeon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the great

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG, 63.

<sup>7</sup> LS, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Kruse, 369.

assembly. He would say: 'On three things does the world stand: On the Torah, and on the Temple service, and on deeds of loving kindness.'"<sup>10</sup>

The first of the accolades that Paul's Jewish people possess is the **adoption** (*hiothesia*, υιοθεσία), which involves the chosen status of Israel (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; Isaiah 43:6; Jeremiah 31:9, 20; Hosea 1:20), and with it God's selection of corporate Israel to accomplish His purposes in the Earth. While the concept of adoption is associated with the redemption of individuals elsewhere in Paul's writing (Galatians 4:5), corporate election of God's own, with the intention of (individuals) accomplishing His purposes (cf. Ephesians 1:5, 11), is in view here. And, with adoption previously addressed (8:15, 23), the intention of such adoption not only involves the inclusion of all redeemed individuals in the community of God, but entering into the eschaton and the Eternal State, with redeemed humanity ruling second only to Him. *This was the overarching purpose of Israel possessing "adoption."*

That to Israel belongs the **glory** should be straightforwardly understood as Paul's ancestors having witnessed the *kavod* (כבוד; Grk. equiv. *doxa*, δόξα) of God at the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 16:7, 10; Leviticus 9:6, 23; Numbers 16:19). To Israel also belongs **the covenants** (*hai diathēkai*, αἱ διαθήκαι), plural, which would include the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:17-21), at Sinai (Exodus 19:5; 21:1-4), the Levites (Numbers 25:21-13; Jeremiah 33:21; Malachi 2:4-5), David (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89:3-4, 28-29; 132:11-12), and the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

The **giving of the Torah** (*nomothesia*, νομοθεσία), which could be rendered as "legislation," given uses of the associated verb *nomotheteō* (νομοθετέω) in Hebrews 7:11; 8:6, is not at all surprising to see among historical accolades. Further listed by Paul is **"the worship"** (RSV), with *latreia* (λατρεία) defined by Thayer as, "the service or worship of God according to the requirements of the levitical law,"<sup>11</sup> with a rendering like "temple service" (NASU) not at all inappropriate. Given the various discussions about the role of the Torah in the post-resurrection era for Believers, seen throughout the letter to the Romans, could Paul have listed "the giving of the Torah and the service," if he thought these things had little value? John Calvin's remarks are to be astutely noted:

"It is the singular honour conferred on the Jewish people that they have God as their lawgiver. If others boast of their Solons and Lycurguses, how much better reason is there for glorying in the law? We read of this in Deut. 4:32. By *service* Paul means that part of the law in which the lawful manner of worshipping God is prescribed, such as rites and ceremonies. These should have been regarded as lawful on account of God's appointment, without which every invention of men is nothing but a profanation of religion."<sup>12</sup>

A more modern commentator like Cranfield asserts, "The fact that ἡ νομοθεσία [*hē nomothesia*] is mentioned among the excellent privileges of Israel is clear of the greatest significance for our understanding of Paul's view of the law. That he is thinking of the law as divinely given goes without saying."<sup>13</sup> Referencing *latreia*, Cranfield also excellently states, "it does not seem altogether unlikely that, as used by Paul here, the term embraced also the faithful non-sacrificial worship of synagogue and pious Jewish home, including such things as prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, the observation of the Sabbath, the reciting of the Shema, and, indeed, all that is meant by the phrase of Mic 6.8."<sup>14</sup> This is echoed by Tim Hegg as well:

<sup>10</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 672-673.

<sup>11</sup> Thayer, 372.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, 463.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

“But the Greek term itself (which would have translated עֲבֹדָה, *avodah*) could likewise embrace the full scope of the pious Jew’s life, both in home and synagogue, as well as in the Temple. Paul counts the manner of life (=service to HaShem) as one of the supreme gifts that God gave to Israel.”<sup>15</sup>

The last of the accolades that Paul lists are **the promises** (*hai epangeliai*, αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι), which would principally involve the various Messianic and Messianic Kingdom expectations given by God to Israel (2 Samuel 7:12, 16; Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5; 31:31-34; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24).

Because Paul is getting ready to talk about a widescale, First Century Jewish rejection of Yeshua—with many of his thoughts in vs. 6-33 following probably directed a little more toward the Jewish Believers in Rome—he definitely wants to emphasize how Israel corporate still remains chosen. Later, toward ch. 11, Paul will describe more the position of non-Jewish Believers in God’s Kingdom, and how they are grafted-in to Israel’s olive tree (11:16-17). As such, they do get to surely benefit from all of the accolades that Paul has just listed in v. 4 regarding the heritage of his people. As James D.G. Dunn puts it,

“[These are] Jewish privileges which Gentile believers now share. The Gentile believer can no more claim a monopoly on the promises of God so as to exclude the Jew, no more than he can regard the law as an exclusively Jewish...possession. The promises are still there for unbelieving Israel to claim, just as the requirements of the law are still there for all believers to fulfill as they walk according to the Spirit (8:4).”<sup>16</sup>

One of the things that must be stressed, however, is that even though Paul will present non-Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah as being grafted-in, and elsewhere composing the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13) or the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16)—the accolades of v. 4 would only compose the *spiritual* heritage of non-Jewish Believers. The contents of v. 4 also compose *the ethnic and cultural* heritage of Paul’s Jewish people. And if anything, one of the most distinct accolades, which is stated directly by Yeshua Himself about the Jewish people, is that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

9:5 The accolades possessed by the Jewish people are further stated by Paul: “to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen” (NRSV). The patriarchs or “ancestors” (HCSB; *hoi pateres*, οἱ πατέρες) are to be rightly viewed as a reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and from this Paul makes a statement about the lineage of the Messiah (cf. Matthew 1; Luke 3), further described in 15:8 in terms of, “I say that Messiah has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers.”

There is a big issue present in v. 5, regarding the nature of the Messiah, and how to translate the Greek *ex hōn ho Christos to kata sarka, ho ōn epi pantōn Theos eulogētos eis tous aīōnas, Amēn* (ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν).<sup>17</sup> If the reference to “God” is to be applied to Yeshua, then v. 5 lays out a fair balance between Yeshua’s humanity and Divinity. If the reference to “God” is to the Father, then it serves to separate out an independent doxology of praise, not directed to the Son. There are two main ways that v. 5 has been commonly translated among modern versions:

“to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen” (RSV).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hegg, *Romans 9-16*, 274.

<sup>16</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 38b:534-535.

<sup>17</sup> “out of whom the Christ – according to flesh, the one being over all God blessed into the ages, Amen” (Brown and Comfort, 555).

<sup>18</sup> The CJB has a rendering consistent with this, although having taken some noticeable liberties:



The humanity of Yeshua is affirmed to be Jewish *kata sarka* (κατὰ σάρκα) in v. 5, yet along with this Yeshua is praised as *epi pantōn Theos* (ἐπὶ πάντων θεός) or “God over all” in v. 5 as well. The significance of Yeshua being incarnated as a human being, from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and later David—a Jewish line—is something that should serve as significantly distinctive of Paul’s fellow Jewish brethren, hopefully enabling the non-Jewish Believers in Rome to exhibit a bit more respect and honor to their fellow Jewish Believers, from whom the Savior arose. The significance of Yeshua being “God over all,” while important for everyone as the Creator taking a decisive interest in the affairs of humankind, is especially piqued, as noted by N.T. Wright, with the God of Israel being personally interested in the promises He issued to His chosen people:

“If we read v. 5 in this way, what force does it add to the opening paragraph as a whole? Just this: that the Messiah who is from Israel’s own race, their highest privilege and final hope, is the very embodiment of their sovereign Lord, their covenant God.”<sup>23</sup>

**6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED” [Genesis 21:12]. 8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is the word of promise: “AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON” [Genesis 18:10, 14].**

9:6-29 Romans 9:6-29 has been traditionally read by many Protestant examiners, from an overwhelmingly Calvinistic grid of God choosing or electing some *individuals* for salvation, and other *individuals* for damnation. Were such questions and issues of this kind of election, those originally posed by the Apostle Paul, in trying to sort through the issue of a widescale, First Century Jewish rejection of Yeshua? For the most part, Second Temple Jews saw their election as God’s chosen more in terms of their ethnicity guaranteeing them a place in God’s Kingdom and the world to come (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1), than anything else. A survey of 9:6-29 demonstrates that this is completely contrary to the thrust of the Tanach, because it has been more common to only see a remnant of those from Israel actually “saved” (vs. 27-28), and now this can only occur through the work of Yeshua as Israel’s Messiah (10:9, 12). Approaching 9:6-29 more from the vantage point of Paul criticizing Jewish ethnic particularism, and how only a remnant within Israel proper has been seen to be saved throughout history, might be difficult for those who are more keen to impress upon the text questions of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Reformers. Craig S. Keener interjects the useful thought,

“Jewish people rightly affirmed God’s sovereignty alongside his election of Israel [i.e., m.*Avot* 3:15]. Yet Paul argues that, with respect to individual *salvation*, God being sovereign precludes him from being bound to choose on the basis of ethnicity. He can save Gentiles as well as Jews, and on the terms he chooses.”<sup>24</sup>

The corporate election of Israel as God’s people remains true, as is seen in Paul’s emphasis on the selection of the progenitors of Israel. Yet, the inclusion of individuals among His Kingdom people is not dependent on the human volition of thinking that ethnicity guarantees one redemption, as those from the nations are included in His plan (vs. 24-26) along with Jews. If anything, it needs to be noted that God has shown mercy to the chosen, corporate community of Israel throughout history, even in instances when mercy from Him was not deserved. As has been demonstrated throughout the record of the Tanach, God has been overly merciful and graceful, regarding the corporate calling and election of

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, in *NIB*, 10:631.

<sup>24</sup> Keener, 120.