

Romans 9 – Missed Inheritance!

After the exhilarating glimpses of God's plans and purposes which he has shared in **Romans 8**, Paul seems to suddenly re-focus on the Jewish people, the Israelites who should be sharing in this great inheritance: "All this should have been theirs!"

We saw in the earlier chapters (**Romans 2, 3 & 4**) how the promises to Abraham and his offspring have been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ and, as Paul wrote, *"he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men but from God."* (**Romans 2:28-29**) He then went on to explain how non-Jews (Gentiles) who put their trust in Jesus the Messiah now actually inherit those promises made to Abraham and effectively become his offspring alongside those ethnic Jews who also trust in Jesus (**ch. 4**).

He moved on to talk about the difference between law and grace and the new life that believers in Jesus experience. Death to the old life and the new life of the Holy Spirit living within us, setting us free from bondage to sin and law, and then looking forward to the future time when the whole of creation will be released from its 'subjection to futility' at 'the revealing of the sons of God'. God's purposes being fulfilled in glory, and – amazingly – our inclusion in them! (**chs. 5-8**)

As a Jew himself, writing about all this magnificent inheritance which is ours because we are in Christ and joined to him, he is painfully aware that most of his fellow-Jews are missing out on the promises which they should have been inheriting alongside the other believers (many of whom are now Gentiles) (**Romans 9:1-3**). This 'coming of age' as sons and heirs which he has just been writing about in **8:23** and which we can see in **Galatians 3:23-4:7** should have been theirs – partly now and fully when we have resurrection bodies.

All of this is the fulfilment of all that went before, from the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac & Jacob), the Law, the Tabernacle and the Temple, along with the covenants which the LORD made with his people, all culminating in the arrival of the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. All this, says Paul, was the Israelites' heritage and should have led to faith in Jesus! (**Romans 9:4-5**)

In **Romans 9:6-13**, he explains again that Abraham's true offspring are those 'of the promise', not those 'of the flesh', which therefore now includes believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews.¹ For those Jews among the Christians in Rome who were reading this letter, this may have been hard to take, as for generations the Jewish people had seen themselves as exclusively the chosen people of God. No wonder that Paul spends much of these next three chapters spelling out the present position of the Jewish people in relation to the new covenant in the Lord Jesus Christ!

As well as pointing out that not all Abraham's **natural** offspring are 'children of promise', he takes the example of Esau and Jacob, Abraham's grandsons, and leads us into understanding that we may find difficult, saying that it is also a matter of **God's purpose, choosing and calling**, not dependent on what anyone has done. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were even born!

To us, that doesn't seem fair, does it? We would like it better if Esau was excluded simply because he despised his birthright, and it seems all wrong to us that Jacob impersonated him and stole the blessing of the firstborn from their father Isaac. Esau seems to have got a raw deal!

Perhaps we need to look back to **Romans 8:28-30**. Maybe it sometimes looks like God does things backwards! He has a purpose: he calls those he wants in that purpose: he knows them before they are born and has already predestined them to become 'conformed to the image of his Son': he justifies them and glorifies them. Probably not the order in which we would have placed events! The thing that makes the difference is that God stands outside of time and so knows ahead of time every choice that every person makes in their life, with such certainty that he can predestine us without affecting our freedom of choice one little bit.

That doesn't seem fair, does it? And Paul tackles exactly that point in **Romans 9:13-18**, even citing Pharaoh hardening his heart and quoting *"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"* from **Malachi 1**. But if we look at that passage, we see that the LORD is talking primarily about his **love and choosing** of

¹ Compare **Galatians 4:21-31** and **Romans 4:13-16**

Jacob/Israel and not so much actual hatred of Esau.¹ Paul also quotes what the LORD said to Moses just before he allowed him to see his glory (but not his face) “*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*” (**Exodus 33:19**).

The emphasis here is on who God is, his majesty, omnipotence and **purpose**. This letter is not written as a theoretical theological textbook, but is addressed to **people who have been included in God’s plans!** Not that we should begin to find fault with what we might see as unfairness, but so that we should see the awesome fact that **he has chosen us and called us**. Paul will look at HOW he does that calling in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, we have some verses that we may find difficult, but Paul is very ‘up front’ about those difficulties! In **Romans 9:19-26**, he emphasises God’s purpose and absolute right of choice to do exactly what he wants and also acknowledges that we humans are likely to complain that ‘it’s not fair!’ But then (again) he turns that round to show God’s **choosing of us** as ‘*vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory*’ (**v.23**).

Paul’s picture of the clay is striking (**v.20-24**). From the same lump of clay, a potter can make some vessels that will be treasured and kept, and others that will just be used and destroyed. We are all made of the same ‘clay’. Some people try God’s patience and are gradually getting themselves completely made ready for destruction (**v.22**) and he has prepared others beforehand with a completely different destination – **glory!** (**v.23**) And that’s **us!!**

Again, Paul writes about God **calling** people, and not only from ethnic Jews but also from among the Gentiles, and quotes from **Hosea 2:23 & 1:10** to back up what he says.² Just another small but significant point: Paul refers to ‘us’, by which he identifies a group that both he and his readers are part of. Not Jews, not Gentiles, but ‘us’ – the church, God’s called-out people, including **all** who have faith in Jesus.

Verses 27-29 are further tragic reminders that not all of ‘the sons of Israel’ will be saved, but only a remnant. Paul quotes from **Isaiah 10:22-23 & 1:9**. The words translated ‘remnant’ (**v.27**) and ‘left’ (**v.29**) come from the same root, meaning ‘left behind’. The severe implication of **v.29** is that all the others (i.e. apart from the remnant) will be removed for judgement, like Sodom and Gomorrah.

In **verses 30-33**, Paul returns to a familiar theme: righteousness by faith or by works. Gentiles – who were not actively aiming for righteousness – found it by [literally ‘out of’] faith. ‘Israel’, by contrast, tried to attain righteousness by law and failed. Why? Because they aimed at it by [‘out of’] works and not out of faith. (See **Romans 3:20 & Galatians 3:16**).

In **v.33**, he mixes two quotations from **Isaiah 28:16** and **Isaiah 8:14**. The first refers to a costly and well-laid foundation stone,³ and the second says very clearly that it is the LORD himself who will be, on the one hand, a sanctuary to a remnant and, on the other, a stumbling stone and a rocky obstacle to ‘both the houses of Israel’ and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Strong words! ⁴

Paul has more to say about ethnic Israel in the next two chapters!

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¹ Perhaps ‘hatred’ by comparison with a greater love? Compare **Luke 14:26**

² In **Hosea**, God gives the prophet a graphic demonstration of the results of the people of Israel turning away from him: he disowns them, saying ‘You are not my people’. But he also gives them a promise that ‘in the place where it is said to them, “You are not my people,” it will be said to them, “You are the sons of the living God.”’ This is the promise that Paul quotes here, applying it not only to Jews, but to Gentiles as well.

³ Compare **1 Corinthians 3:11** and **Ephesians 2:20** plus **1 Peter 2:4-10**, where Peter quotes some of the same passages from Hosea and Isaiah, plus **Psalms 118:22**. See also **Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:11 & Luke 2:34**.

⁴ See **Matthew 11:6, Luke 7:23**. Jesus himself is the potential stumbling stone. ‘Take offence’ and ‘stumble’ are the same word – *skandalizo*. Those who don’t stumble are the ones who trust in him!