

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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What About Israel?

by Dan Trygg

“I am telling the truth in Christ, 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 Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 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 Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. ⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel...”

Romans 9:1-6

Paul introduces a new subject in Romans 9, ...*Why had Israel, as a whole, not responded to the gospel?* Why had they not embraced Jesus as the Messiah? This was not simply an academic, dry theological question for Paul. He begins his discussion of this topic by clearly communicating the passion of his heart. He had “**great sorrow and unceasing grief**” over this reality. The word for “sorrow” here means “pain, grief, mental anguish, distress, regret, affliction” and the word translated as “grief” above means “severe and sudden pain, deep mental anguish and distress, agitation, a state of intense anxiety, mental pain and consuming grief, strong lamentation.” As you can see, these are strong emotionally-descriptive words by themselves. Adding the adjective “great” and the participle “unceasing” or “unrelenting” really paints a powerfully intense word-picture. **Paul had been, and continues to be, deeply affected by this tragic reality, ...namely, that the majority of the people of Israel have not come to faith**, but even have rejected the gospel, and actively oppose the preaching of Jesus as the Messiah sent from God.

If these word pictures were not enough to communicate Paul’s emotional grief over this matter, **he goes so far as to say that he would willingly give up his own salvation**, and be accursed before God, eternally separated from Christ, **if somehow that would bring his “kinsmen according to the flesh” to faith in Christ. This is an echo of Moses’ intercession for Israel in Exodus**, when, after the episode of the golden calf, he prayed that God would have mercy on them and forgive their sin. “...and if not,” he prayed, “please blot me out of the book [of Life] You have written...” (32:32). Moses was willing to sacrifice his own eternal destiny, if God would not hear his prayer and be willing to forgive Israel. Basically, he was saying that if God didn’t listen to him, then just put him to death! **God’s response was that He would deal with each person’s choices.** If they sinned against Him, He would blot those who were guilty from His book. **God did not accept Moses’ extreme emotional reaction. However, in answer to Moses’ prayer, He told him to lead the people onward** to the place He had spoken of, the land of promise. **He had not abandoned the whole nation. He did, however, bring judgment upon the guilty**, those who had been actively involved in the worship of the golden calf idol.

In a similar way, Paul was praying that God would accept him as a sacrifice of divine wrath, as one “accursed-away-from Christ”, on behalf of his fellow Israelites. To us, this is a foreign-sounding thought, but for a Jew from the first century, **Paul was praying that God’s wrath and curse would be poured out on him, in place of his people.** He was offering himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for *them*. This reveals the intensity of his heart toward his people, but **the truth is that no sinful person could ever take the sins of another** (Psa. 49:7,8), no matter what the desire of their heart might be. **As was true in Moses’s day, the soul that sins will die** (cf. Ezk. 18:4). **Each person is responsible for their own choices.** Paul already had stated that the wages of sin is death (6:23), so he would not be able to be a fitting sacrifice for anyone else. Only Christ, who was sinless, and lived a perfect life, could ever bear the sins of another. Because He was God, his life was also of infinite worth, so He could take the sins of all humanity upon Himself, and offer Himself on behalf of us all (Heb. 9:28).

Why was Paul so intensely involved in this matter? To Paul, they are “my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, ...they are Israelites, of whom is the adoption as sons, the glory (the “Shekinah-glory”), the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple-service, and the promises, ...of whom are the patriarchs, and out from whom is the Christ (Messiah) according to the flesh...” That is a lot of history! With that background, you can begin to understand the personal significance of this entire subject to Paul. **They were physically and spiritually his people!**

Aside from his natural identification with his people, however, **if one were just to stand back and look at “salvation history” it would seem that God chosen the people of Israel to be His special people.** God had initiated His program to deliver planet earth from Satanic oppression and the destruction of sin, by choosing to work with Abraham, and his family. **The promises and prophecies of God were intimately and intricately entwined in the history of the Jewish people.** Through Abraham and his “seed” God promised to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3;

22:17,18). He had made a covenant with them to that effect. He had redeemed them by a powerful display of power, forcing the Pharaoh to let them go from serving him as a nation of slaves. He had made them His own nation; led them through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night; gave them His law; had them construct a tabernacle (and later a temple) to carry out the religious services and practices He required of them (Exodus).

The Jews were a separated people. They had been instructed to sanctify themselves to God, which meant that much of their lifestyle required that they could not just “hang out” with other people. They couldn’t eat what they ate. They tried to keep certain sanitary rules, which set them apart. **They were taught that others were “unclean”, and did not associate with “Gentiles”. Of course, it did not take the Gentiles long to pick up on this, and they thought of Jews as arrogant, priggish and “full of themselves”. It was not uncommon for prejudice and persecution to rise up against the Jews, which had the effect of causing them to huddle together even closer and tighter in their little enclaves. This set the stage for the need for Paul to address this problem in this letter.** Even though the church in Rome was undoubtedly started by Jews (probably from Pentecost – Acts 2:10), the influx of Gentile believers had probably eclipsed the Jewish proportion of the church (as it had all throughout the Roman Empire outside of Judea). **Some of these Jew/Gentile tensions still cropped up from time to time, and needed to be addressed to maintain unity and love.**

Also, this was an intriguing problem. If the Jews were somehow “God’s chosen people”, why did they not respond to God’s Messiah when He came?

Paul’s first point – “...it is not as though the word of God has failed.” (Rom. 9:6). **First and foremost, let us not miss the clear and obvious truth that God’s Word was fulfilled.** He did not miss a beat. His prophecies and promises were fulfilled with incredible accuracy and detail. Jesus was Abraham’s “seed”, ...David’s “seed” (2 Sam. 7:12), ...the fulfillment of hundreds of OT prophecies. God’s Word accurately predicted His miraculous birth (Isa. 7:14), His pre-birth existence and the city of His birth (Mic. 5:2), that He would be called a “Nazarene” (Isa. 11:2), His ministry in Galilee (Isa. 9:1), details of His death, burial and resurrection (Psa. 22; Isa. 53) to name just a few of the many prophecies that spoke about the coming Messiah, His ministry, and His mission.

Paul’s next point -- “...For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants...” (Romans 9:6,7). **Not everyone who was physically descended from Abraham, or Israel, or David, was spiritually a child of God, nor part of God’s purpose in bringing about His plan.** It has never been true that everyone descended from Israel had automatic favor with God, ...nor that they are part of God’s covenant people, or part of His plan to bring the Messiah into the world.

This should be obvious, but Paul needed to break it down, using some clear examples.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. God chose to work through Isaac, even before he was born (Gen. 17:19). Does that mean Ishmael did not have a relationship with God, or that his line was cursed? No. In fact, God promised to *bless* Ishmael, make him fruitful and multiply him, and make *him* a great nation (Gen. 17:20).

Then, **Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob.** When Isaac was 59 years of age, after nearly 20 years of marriage, he prayed for his wife, Rebekah, because she was barren, and she conceived. She had twin sons in her womb, and they seemed to struggle with each other. When she sought God about this, she was told that there were two nations in her womb, “and two peoples shall be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:22,23). **Paul’s comment on this situation was “...though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, ‘the older will serve the younger’” (Romans 9:11). Note that this is NOT saying anything about whether either was chosen to be saved or rejected.** It is so that GOD’S PURPOSE ACCORDING TO HIS CHOICE WOULD STAND, not because of anything either child had done, or would do, but BECAUSE OF HIM WHO CALLS. **What purpose did God have in mind? To bring His Messiah into the world! To bring His plan of deliverance and salvation to pass.**

What is the big deal? The point of this whole narrative is that, in a culture where it was expected that the older son would have the preeminence, **God chose to use the younger son to pass down His covenant call and Messianic lineage.** What of Esau? Was he an unbeliever? Was he rejected by God? No. In fact, God made a very clear point to tell the Israelites that God had dispossessed the Horites who had lived in Seir and gave their land to Esau, *just as He was about to do for Israel* as they prepared to enter Canaan (Deut. 2:1-12,22,29). Furthermore, several of Esau’s sons were given names that indicate Esau’s faith in God (Eliphaz = God is fine gold; Reuel = friend of God – Gen. 36:4).

What about verse 13? -- “...according as it had been written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’” First, this is a quote from Malachi, looking *backward* at what happened to Esau’s descendants. The word “hate” does not mean “bitter anger”, as in English. It means to “treat as less important”. It has nothing to do with Esau’s salvation. It is about the outworking of Esau’s lineage in history. **God chose to work with Jacob, and kept his lineage continuing, so that His purpose would be fulfilled.** He allowed Esau’s descendants to reap the consequences of their actions.