

Romans: Covenant Predestined, Part 6a

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EXPOSITION: Chapter 9:1-29

9:1-5—Introduction: The Tension Between God's Promises and Israel's Plight

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—**2** that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. **3** For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. **4** They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. **5** To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.—Paul shifts abruptly from celebration in 8:31-39 to lamentation in 9:1-5, expressing his heart's desire for his own kinsmen, the Jews. Knowing that he is “regarded as a traitor to the dearest interests of his people (Acts 21:23; 22:22; 25:24) the Apostle opens this division of his subject by giving vent to his real feelings, with extraordinary vehemence of protestation” (Brown, p. 95). Utilising courtroom terminology, Paul claims that his conscience “bears me witness in the Holy Spirit” (v. 1). This is in harmony with the biblical law of testimony that truth must be established by two or three witnesses (see my comments 8:15; see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30; John 8:17). Paul, his conscience, and the Holy Spirit all bear the same testimony. By this means, he establishes his “unceasing anguish” (v. 2) for his people. This is in the tradition of the OT prophets (Jer. 4:9, 19; 14:17; Lam. 1-5; Dan 9:3), and is greater than mere natural empathy, emanating, instead, from the Spirit of God himself. This is so intense that, if at all possible, he was willing to be “accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of [his] brothers” (v. 3), or, in the Greek, *anathematised*. As a covenant theologian, Paul is reinforcing a covenant category. In accordance with Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, the stipulations, or commandments, of the covenant were backed by its sanctions of cursing and blessing. While Israel was free to choose to obey or disobey its commandments (stipulations), she could not choose its consequences (sanctions). And the consequence of disobedience entailed being avowed by God as *accursed*, or as *anathema*.

As a student of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek OT, Paul was using a word familiar to the Jews. There, we discover that the word *anathema* is used 25 times in 15 verses for the Hebrew *cherem* or *charam* for that which man has either devoted to the Lord as an offering and, thus, beyond redemption (Lev. 27:28) or for idols that God has devoted to destruction, hence, accursed (Num. 21:3; Deut. 7:26; 13:15, 17; 20:17; Jsh 6:17, 18; 7:1, 11, 12, 13; 22:20; 1 Chron. 2:7; Zech. 14:11). For example, Israel was directed by God to devote the Canaanites and their cities to destruction (Num. 21:3; Deut. 20:17), of which the destruction of Jericho was an example (Jsh 6:17-18). However, if Israel or an Israelite were to hold back that which was devoted to destruction (i.e., an “abominable” and, hence, accursed thing; an idol), they themselves would be destroyed (Deut. 7:26; 13:15, 17). The sin of Achan was precisely this (Jsh 7:1, 11, 12; 22:20). And because of it, Israel was not able to stand before her enemies (Jsh 7:12, 13).

With the insight and, indeed, foresight of a prophet, as an apostle of Christ, Paul knows the true condition of Israel, as “accursed and cut off from Christ” (v. 3), and the catastrophic judgement that is about to befall them. The Lord has prosecuted the covenant lawsuit, and they have been found guilty (see comments on the Covenant Lawsuit at [2:1-4:25—Judgement & Justification: Justice Promised](#); [3:21-31—The Justice of God & Justification by Faith Alone](#); [4:23-25—The Faith of Abraham & the Believer](#); [5:20](#); [8:1](#); [8:15](#)). They have disobeyed and now they are being dispossessed. As Jesus had previously declared to them: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...’ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matt. 21:42b-43; also 23:37-39). With both temporal and eternal ramifications personally and corporately, Israel’s dispossession of the kingdom spells the Gentile’s possession of it. Imbued with a godly fear and intense grief, like Moses Paul would wish that this judgement – the imminent destruction of AD 70 and their expulsion from the Land – and indeed, their being “cut off” from the presence of the Lord, reiterating Adam’s expulsion from the Garden, were his own fate (Exod. 32:30-32). He will not only expand further in ch. 11 on the problem of Israel’s unbelief and severance from the olive tree, resulting in the Gentile inclusion, but also prophesy their eventual regrafting (11:17-24).

In vv. 4-5 Paul enumerates the great privileges of the Jews so as to forestall any diminution of their significance in the mind of his audience, nor question as to God’s faithfulness concerning his promise to them. Of special note is Paul’s reference to

“covenants” as plural, whereas the singular is more common in both OT and NT. Clearly, he is referring to the various iterations of the covenant in its several administrations from Adam, Noah, Abraham, and to David. Nonetheless, Paul underlines the unity of the covenant in Ephesians 2:12 when he refers to the “covenants of promise”; the singular “promise” providing the common denominator of the various iterations of the covenant, into which the Gentiles have now been brought by the blood of Christ. The next section corrects the Jew’s misconstrual of “the promise” and clarifies its true meaning.

Building on his teaching concerning the identity of Israel in 2:17-29 (see my comments) – “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly... But a Jew is one inwardly...” (vv. 28-29) – Paul now provides a more profound theological reflection and scriptural exegesis, appealing to the lives of the patriarchs, and correcting the error of Jewish self-perception as exclusively ethnic.

9:6-29—*Defining the Promise: God’s Sovereign Election*

9:6-13—*The Israel within Israel*

6 *But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named [kaleo].” 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. 9 For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11. though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls [kaleo]—12 she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”*—Provoked by the dilemma of Jewish unbelief and Roman dominance, v. 6 immediately forestalls any question as to the integrity and efficacy of God’s word to them. If God’s promise to Abraham is true, why then their present situation? Paul responds by the statement of a first principle, radically redefining Israel, and, hence, correcting a fundamental error of the Jews: “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel”. In other words, there is not only a true Israel *within* Israel but also, its corollary, an Israel *without* Israel. In other words, ethnicity does not define one as a true descendant of Abraham.

To prove his point, Paul mounts a cumulative argument, starting with Isaac and building with Jacob and Esau. In v. 7, citing Genesis 21:12, he shows that Abraham’s seed is *called* through Isaac: “and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named [kaleo - called]’” (cited also in Heb. 11:18; Gal. 3:29). Only through Isaac, can one be called by God and, hence, designated as Abraham’s seed. Why is this? Because Isaac, like Abraham himself, is uniquely called out by God through his word. Isaac, in contrast to Ishmael, despite both being born of Abraham, was the miraculous result of a promise of God’s word to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-5, 18-21; 17:1-8, 15-21; 18:10-14, 19; 18:18-19; 21:1-7; 22:17-18; Rom. 4). So, in v. 8 Paul expounds what this implies: “This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (v. 8; see Gal. 3:6-9). This same principle applies then to all true descendants of Abraham; they must be born of God, not merely of Abraham. To the Jewish mind this is revolutionary, radically redefining what it means to be a Jew.

In vv.10-13, moving from Isaac, Paul now appeals to Esau and Jacob. To forestall the Jew’s claim that any appeal to a distinction between Isaac and Ishmael was invalid because the latter was illegitimate, Paul backs up his argument with Jacob and Esau. Despite both Jacob and Esau being born to Isaac *and* Rebekah, God makes a selection between the two. The Greek, *kaleo*, meaning to call, from v. 7, is echoed in v. 11: “though they [Esau and Jacob] were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls [kaleo]”. God makes a distinction between them – for “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (v. 13) – regardless of any disqualifying factor, as in the case of Ishmael. This indisputably disproves election according to birth and proves its corollary, election according to grace, to the promise of a seed *called* though Isaac. God *calls* Jacob before they were born, so that neither had had opportunity to merit his favour nor disfavour. Esau, though born legitimately as Abraham’s fleshly seed, is, nonetheless, not his spiritual seed, that is to say, born spiritually according to the election of grace. To repeat, it is therefore, “not because of works [or natural birth and privilege] but because of him who calls (*kaleo*)” (v. 11b). God’s effectual *call* of a person and their spiritual birth is both sovereign and gracious because he has first called from eternity; hence, the believer is foreordained to salvation (see vv. 23-24; 1:7; 8:28, 30; 11:5; Psalms 139:16; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 13:48; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2:7; Gal. 1:15; Eph. 1:4-5, 11; 2:10; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9; also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chs. 3 and 10; Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*; see also my comments on v. 30 dealing with monergism).

Moreover, the divine selection of Jacob before the twins were born is a reversal of the privilege due the firstborn; instead, the older (Esau) now serving the younger (Jacob; v. 12). The election of grace, thus, nullifies every claim to natural or racial privilege. God's dealings with the patriarchs was to one end:

... The purpose was to make him [Abraham] *the father of all who believe* without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ... as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls [*kaleo*] into existence the things that do not exist.

Romans 4:11b, 17 (author's emphasis)

In other words, despite being fleshly sons of Abraham, natural birth nor its privileges signify the true "Israel of God". Rather, as Paul says to the Galatians: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but *a new creation*. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon *the Israel of God*" (Gal. 6:15-16, author's emphasis). As with the original creation, God supernaturally *calls* forth the new by his word. The true Israel are those, like Isaac and Jacob, who are born of the Spirit because they have been *called* into being according to the electing purpose of God. They are thus called forth as "children of the promise" (v. 8).

But what exactly is "the promise"? Again this was misconstrued by the Jews as exclusively natural descent in a natural land. So, Paul clarifies what it is in 4:13: "For *the promise* to Abraham and his offspring that he would be *heir of the world* did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (author's emphasis). The promise was not the "righteousness of faith" but rather that Abraham and his seed would be "heir of the world...*through* the righteousness of faith" (see my comments at [4:13](#)). Justification is not, therefore, the epicentre of the epistle, rather it is God's plan for the nations. The nations are promised to the Son as his inheritance (Ps. 2:8; 22:27; 67:7; 72:8; 89:27). This universal focus is the essence of his argument from ch. 1 onwards, that the true Israel of God, Abraham's seed, is not ethnic but spiritual, embracing believing Jew and Gentile. To prosecute this, he shifts the emphasis from the Jews and Abraham (chs. 2, 4) to Adam (ch. 5) to show that God's purpose has always been *the world*. Abraham and Moses are merely the reiteration of Adam, of God's purpose for man. Even so, they are a progression in that purpose, that man will fill the earth and take dominion under God and his law-word (Gen. 1:26-28). Paul situates Abraham within God's plan for mankind, enfolding redemption within the plan for creation so that history moves from Creation to New Creation. As the Creator-God, God's purpose is therefore for all mankind, not merely one race, the Jews. This means that the Gospel is not only *universal* – for all mankind – but also *cosmic*, for the whole of the created order. In fact, its mandate reiterates the Creation/Cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:15 as reflected in the Great Commission's directive of Matthew 28:18-20 to bring *all* nations under Christ's dominion, teaching them to obey all his commandments (see my comments on the Cultural Mandate at 1:3-4; 2:21-24; 3:20, 26; ch. 4 - *Gospel Scope*; 5:1-11; 5:12-21- *From De-Creation to Re-Creation*; ch. 6 - *The Law of God, the Adam Belief-System, and Protestant Confusion*; ch. 6 - *Culturally Compromised by Misreading Romans*; ch. 6 - *Paul's Real Gospel Manifesto*; 7:16-25 - *Romans 7: The Key to Cultural Dominion*; 8:17). Like Eden, the Promised Land is, thus, merely a teacher or tithe, pointing to the promise of the whole earth and thus to *Paradise Restored*. Israel was always designed to take God's reign to the entire earth (Deut. 4; Exod. 19), which, despite their national disobedience, ultimately occurred through the Gospel, fulfilling the Abrahamic promise. It is, therefore, patently clear that natural descent from Abraham does not define the true Israel of God.

Although, as we shall see, it does not nullify God's purpose through the Jewish people as a repository of divine revelation nor a Gentile appreciation for them (9:4-5; 11:1-2, 18, 24, 26, 29). Without Christ, the Gentiles remained "... alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise ..." (Eph. 2:12). However, the revelation of God through the prophets, patriarchs, and covenants now provides believing Gentiles a common-wealth with the Jewish people. Yet, operating on Paul's distinguishing between a *natural* and a *spiritual* Israel, there is, nonetheless, a corporate election that still applies: a calling out of a people – "a holy nation" – to himself, now fulfilled in the church, the true Israel, in which there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28). As Peter teaches, citing Exodus 19:5-6, Deuteronomy 7:6, and Isaiah 61:6:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

Election, in Christ, is thus not only personal but also corporate—the church is now the “holy nation”. This was explicated by Paul in ch. 5 concerning Christ’s covenant headship as the last Adam and second man (see also 1 Cor. 15:45, 47). Our solidarity in Christ, as covenant head, means that we are one in him; it is the source of the unity of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Cor. 12:13; see my comments 8:23). Indeed, as the final and consummate covenant head, he also embraces and fulfils that of Abraham redemptively and Moses corporately. As Moses established the corporate order of the older covenant Church, Christ does likewise for the newer covenant. Just as Moses delivered the covenant law to the nation, assigning the twelve tribes their order of marching and encampment, Christ provided twelve apostles and, hence, “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3, NASB), and as the ascended covenant head of his body still gives the ascension gift-ministries of Ephesians 4:11, including apostles, although, unlike the first century, without canonical authority (see also 1 Cor. 12:28). Therefore, the election of *natural* Israel according to God’s purpose, as the purveyors of his revelation to man, is typological of those called out by the election of grace from both Jew *and* Gentile to form the true Israel of God as a corporate reality (see 1 Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4; Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). *Natural* Israel was elect for a purpose, so that, through the covenants of promise, the *spiritual* Israel of God would be called out from both the Jews and the Gentiles to form a new “holy nation”. Moreover, the OT economy of Israel provides the prototype not only for the church corporately (Heb. 12:22-23; Acts 7:38) but also for the nations and their governance under the law-word of God (Deut. 4:1-8; Rom. 3:31; 1 Tim. 1:8-11). Additionally, and finally, the distinction between *natural* and *spiritual* Israel also provides the distinction between the *visible* and *invisible* church, which is so crucial in times of spiritual declension and apostasy. Just as an Israelite was not saved by virtue of membership in the nation nor are those of an ecclesiastical institution or body. There is always a people within a people who are the believing remnant, chosen by grace (9:27; 11:5). Israel provides the type in this regard and, as already stated, was elect as both a model and as a repository of divine revelation. Hence, Paul’s warnings of ch. 11 concerning the debt owed to the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, Paul is in complete accordance with both Jesus and John the Baptist in their posture toward the Jewish establishment in regard to their true spiritual paternity. They both roundly rebuked the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees for their false reliance upon their natural descent from Abraham as their father. In their unbelief, while claiming to be sons of Abraham, they were, in reality, of their father, the devil.

And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 3:9–10

They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.”

They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:33, 37–44

Although Paul had every reason to place confidence in the flesh – “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of

the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” – he could nonetheless declare that “... we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3, 5–6). His conversion was so complete that he had zero dependence on his natural descent from Abraham. This was a 180 degree turn from his past reliance on his Jewishness. He had repented of the Jew’s error that natural birth, their descent from Abraham, and that mere possession of their racial privileges – the law and the covenants – nor even the law’s performance (see 9:30–10:21), was sufficient to be just before God. Instead, distinguishing between natural and spiritual Israel, Paul now proclaims that birth by the Spirit through God’s sovereign and gracious choice is – and always was – the only way to be just in the sight of God. There is no indication in the passage that there is anything of us that causes election, not even our faith, it is absolutely unconditional. Salvation is, therefore, *of the Lord*.

Therefore, to summarise and conclude this section, to prove that God’s word has not failed (v. 6), Paul introduces the principle that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (v. 8). He then expounds this, using the examples of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to show that “the children of the promise” (v. 8) are all those who believe, both Jew and Gentile. They are not *natural* Israel, the thought seeded by Paul back in 2:28-29 (see my comments). As Paul stressed to the Galatians: “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). According to 4:13, the promise to Abraham was never merely that of natural descendants but rather it reiterated and amplified Adam’s mandate for the whole of mankind to fill and cultivate the whole earth, taking dominion for God. Moreover it restated “the promise” of Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman – presaging the incarnation and a redeemed humanity – would crush the serpent’s head. A promise not only of personal but also cultural dominion over sin throughout the entire world. This promise – the proto-Gospel of Genesis 3:15 – is so central to Paul’s thought that he will reference it at the climax of his epistle, prophesying the imminent overthrow of pagan Rome by the Christian Gospel (16:20). The rest, as they say, is history: with the fall of Rome in AD 476 and the emergence of Christendom by the ninth century, Christianity, notwithstanding the rise of Islam, became the dominant influence moulding the Mediterranean world, Europe, and the British Isles.

In the next passage Paul pre-empts possible objections to God’s electing purpose. To do so he reverts to his dialogue method of posing rhetorical questions (see vv. 14, 19; 2:1-3; 3:27-31). Paul, knowing the human condition, understands the inevitable response to his assertion of God’s sovereignty. If election and, therefore, salvation are independent of anything in us, how can God find fault? He is patently unjust to judge or distinguish between us, as Paul has just taught, citing the examples of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau. If God’s choice is predestined there is no basis for God’s justice. How is this fair or equitable? Or even “righteous” (v. 14), *adikia* in Greek, from a covenant faithfulness perspective? Whether this was a Gentile accusation, or uniquely Jewish as some argue, the underlying presumption is the same: the authority to stand in judgement over God. In response, rather than providing a theodicy, a justification of God, Paul reasserts the sovereignty of God (vv. 14-18) and exposes the presumption behind the objection, the right to stand in judgement over God; and, thereby, reaffirms the Creator/creature distinction (vv. 19-23; see my comments on the Creator/creature distinction at [1:22-23](#) to appreciate how its destruction is basic to all humanist thought).

9:14-23—Objections Answered: The Freedom and Purpose of God

14 *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!* **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.”* **16** *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* **17** *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”* **18** *So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.* **19** *You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”* **20** *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”* **21** *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?* **22** *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—*These verses predictably provoke the human heart, and commentators have not been exempt: Dodd brands the argument as “a false step” and “the weakest point in the whole epistle”, while O’Neill brands it as “thoroughly immoral”. Even several of the church fathers succumbed to similar responses, holding that vv. 14-19 were Paul’s rendering of his opponents, notably Origen and Chrysostom, while Pelagius attributed vv. 15-19 directly to an objector (Moo, p. 590). Paul’s declaration of God’s absolute sovereignty in this passage and the entire chapter exposes our own hearts. It either provokes our presumed autonomy or our obeisance to God and to his right over our lives.

Verse 14 opens with the accusation against the justice of God in view of God’s choice between Jacob and Esau: “What shall

we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" Paul's response – By no means! – categorically throws it out of court.

Verse 15 immediately provides the reason why: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." God is both sovereign *and* just in his dealings with man and in the beneficent distribution of his mercy and compassion.

Paul's defence of God, therefore, bypasses autonomous man's assumptions and reasoning by declaring and reasserting God's absolute, predestinating sovereignty and freedom (see Augustine's comment on v.14, *Letters* 194.8.35 [PL33.886]; also Calvin, *Institutes* 3.22.8). Harking back to his explication of the human condition of ch. 1, Paul responds to the accusation against God's character aware that man, despite his clear knowledge of God through direct apprehension, actively suppresses the truth (see my comments [1:18-20](#)). He desperately attempts to build a roof over his head to keep out the knowledge of God. Like his first parents, he stands in judgement over God, appropriating to himself the prerogatives of deity, determining truth and error for himself (Gen. 3:5). Underlying, therefore, the question against the justice of God is this presumption: that autonomous man's reason is both neutral and sufficient to preside over the God question. Rather than man standing under the judgement of God, God is put in the dock and is on trial. Man's truth is, therefore, self-determined and arbitrary. The apostle's response, as we have noted, is to bypass the arguments that are raised up against the knowledge of God and declare, instead, the transcendent knowledge of God by appealing, not to reason but to revelation. He does this by citing the Scriptures. He thus puts his confidence in the Holy Spirit, as the divine author, to witness to the revelatory knowledge of God already clear to man through both creation and his inner life (1:18-20; 2:15). In this way, Paul's strategy is a supernatural one, relying on the Spirit of God to change man's heart. As the psalmist indicates, the heart and the mind are intrinsically connected: "For the inward *mind* and *heart* of a man are deep" (Ps. 64:6, author's emphasis; see also Deut. 15:9; 2 Sam.. 13:33; Esther. 6:6; Isa. 10:7; Matt. 9:4; Luke. 9:47; Acts 8:22). And as Paul has already established in ch. 1, despite man's clear knowledge of God he actively holds down the truth; but to do so his reasoning cannot cohere with reality, although this does not happen without his heart first being hardened: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their *thinking*, and their foolish *hearts* were darkened" (1:21, author's emphasis). Every system of unbelief is a heart problem before it is a conjured intellectual one: "The fool has said in his *heart*, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1, author's emphasis). The thoughts of man generate from the heart, as evidenced by the psalmist: "The imaginations of their heart run riot" (Ps. 73:7). This was also asserted by Jesus: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries" (Mark 7:21). So, without his heart being renewed by the Spirit man's futile thinking remains intact (John 3:6; 4:24; 6:63; Rom.. 8:5; 1 Cor. 2:3-16). Therefore, Paul's strategy is to bring the transcendent reality of God to bear upon the inner man, to speak to his spirit, the inner core of his being, rather than engage him on his own terms. There is no neutrality, man's reason is congenitally biased against the revelation of God. He is morally and ethically at enmity with God. And, therefore, there is no common ground between reason and revelation. The former must submit to the latter, and think in terms of God-defined categories of reality. Hence, Paul's proclamation of God's freedom and total sovereignty in the face of autonomous man's prideful reasonings (see my comments on [vv. 19-21](#) for Paul's apologetic method).

In v. 16 Paul draws out the application of his citation from Exodus 33:19 that God shows mercy and compassion on whom he wills: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy." Because God's choice of an individual – Isaac or Jacob, for example – is completely independent and free, there is nothing in man, neither his will nor his strength, that produces salvation. God's predestinating election is, therefore, unconditional.

Verse 17 again asserts the sovereignty and freedom of God to do what he wills. In vv. 15-16 Paul expands on the positive aspect of God's predestinating purpose, but this time, by using Pharaoh as his example, he emphasises the negative: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

God either positively bestows mercy or he does not. In Pharaoh's case he has withheld it. Indeed, despite Adam's unique sin (and culpability) as covenant head, all men, universally, are *personally and individually* at enmity with God and under his judgement: "sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to *all* men because *all* sinned" (5:12, author's emphasis). Throughout chs. 1-3 Paul builds his argument, showing the universality of sin: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Because of men's "hard and impenitent hearts" they are "storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath" and are worthy only of damnation (2:5, 16; also 1:18; 3:10-12, 23; 6:23). Damnation is merited, salvation is not—it is unmerited and, hence, a free gift. Apart from God's sovereign intervention and bestowal of mercy, *all* men are sinners and, therefore, already stand condemned. Hence, while bestowal of mercy and hardening are parallel acts of divine sovereignty, they are not identical.

So, in v. 18 God demonstrates his power in Pharaoh, not by bestowing mercy but by hardening his heart: “So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills”. As Paul explained in ch. 1, because of his suppression of the truth, unregenerate man is handed over by God to the full outworking of his futile thinking and unrestrained passions (vv. 24, 26). God, therefore, hands Pharaoh over to his already stubborn and hardened heart (see Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:7, 34; 10:1). He is consigned to the consequences of his own choices. As Boettner astutely comments:

In all the reprobate there is a blindness and an obstinate hardness of heart; and when any, like Pharaoh, are said to have been hardened of God we may be sure that they were already in themselves worthy of being delivered over to Satan. The hearts of the wicked are, of course, never hardened by the direct influence of God,—He simply permits some men to follow out the evil impulses which are already in their hearts, so that, as a result of their own choices, they become more and more calloused and obstinate. And while it is said, for instance, that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, it is also said that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod. 8:15; 8:32; 9:34). One description is given from the divine view-point, the other is given from the human view-point. God is ultimately responsible for the hardening of the heart in that He permits it to occur, and the inspired writer in graphic language simply says that God does it; but never are we to understand that God is the immediate and efficient cause. (Boettner, p. 112).

Nevertheless, the apostle, asserts the sovereign will of God as determinative in the hardening. As stated by Murray in commenting on this passage:

In view of the sustained emphasis on the free, sovereign will of God we must recognize that this sovereignty is just as inviolate in the hardening as it is in the showing mercy. ... This is but another way of saying that the sovereignty of God is ultimate in both cases and as ultimate in the negative as in the positive.” (Murray, Vol. 2, p. 27).

The hardening of Pharaoh, as sovereignly predestined, is seen in God’s revealing to Moses beforehand that *he* would harden Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3). Despite man’s culpability, God’s sovereign will is determinative.

Although, because God is not only sovereign but also good, even the negative determinations of his sovereign will turn out for good: God’s power is displayed, and his name is proclaimed throughout the earth (v. 17). Evil is vanquished and God’s people are delivered (see Exod. 4-14). His purposes are proven to be victorious in history, in this time-space world, despite evil. And this is because his predestinating purpose called from eternity “vessels of mercy” he “prepared beforehand for glory”. History, in all its particulars (including mercy and hardening), is the outworking of God’s eternal decrees.

Paul brings out God’s beneficent design, through the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, in vv. 22-24 posing rhetorically, “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?”, or in the modern idiom it could be paraphrased, “*So what* if God used Pharaoh, making some vessels of wrath and others of mercy?” In other words, it is his sovereign right—he is God, and doesn’t answer to men. It is a response to v. 20, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”

Nevertheless, in v. 19 the objector accuses God: “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” Paul then responds with the series of rhetorical questions just mentioned above (vv. 20, 21, 22-23). According to the objector, God’s sovereign disposition to harden the heart, implies that we are merely pawns in his game. His will is irresistible; how then, can we be reasonably held to account. It is patently unfair. And so God’s justice is maligned. For Paul’s response see my comments above on vv.14 and 15. What Paul does *not* say is the crux of it. There is absolutely no attempt to reconcile Paul’s two seemingly irreconcilable assertions: God’s absolute sovereignty and man’s total accountability. Let us take note and learn (see my comments on vv. 30-32).

Commenting on v. 20, Murray appositely observes:

The answer is the appeal to the reverential silence which the majesty of God demands of us. ... When we are dealing with ultimate facts categorical affirmation must content us. So here, when dealing with the determinate will of God, we have an ultimate on which we may not interrogate him nor speak back when he has uttered his verdict. Who are we to dispute his government? The apostle’s answer is significant not only as illustrating his method and the assumptions

upon which this method is based but also for what he does not say. If, in the matter concerned, the determinative will of God were not ultimate, if the differentiation of verse 18 were not due solely to God's sovereign will, then the apostle would have to deny the assumption on which the objection is based. This he does not do. (Murray, Vol. 2, pp. 31-32).

Verses 20 and 21, revealing the apostle's apologetic method and presupposition, strategically appeal to the Creator/creature distinction: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" For a fuller explanation of how the obliteration of this distinction is the crux of all humanist thought, see my comments on 1:22-23. When this is fully apprehended, the believer will be equipped to provide a defence of the faith (1 Pet. 3:15), regardless of the particular intellectual packaging of the unbelief. Paul's fundamental presupposition behind all his thought is the transcendence of God. Its denial is the heart of all idolatry. It first occurred in the Garden when man's first parents stood in judgement *over* God's word, determining for themselves what was true (Gen. 3). Hence, the immanent (finite man and the world of matter) replaced the transcendent (the infinite God). And with the Creator-God removed the creature instead became god (Gen. 3:5).

Moreover, because predestination is an inescapable category, once it is denied to the infinite Creator-God, it transfers to the finite would-be god, Man. Man, as his own measure, must now exercise total control. And this predestinating power is exercised through his corporate organ the state: indeed, *vox populi, vox Dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God. Even democracy, apart from the Christian consensus, becomes a dangerous heresy. The state must exercise totalistic predestinating control over the cosmos. Every detail of man's existence must come under the providential control of the state, presiding over life and death itself, legislating from the womb to the tomb through policies of abortion and euthanasia. And for the life that is convenient and deemed worthy, the welfare state provides, from health to education to work and eventually retirement. Every detail of man's existence must be within his control—even the climate. And because it remains inviolably in the control of God, man rages when the vagaries of Nature impinge upon his mortal existence. He is exposed as impotent in the face of nature's God and reminded of his mere creaturehood. Hence the current climate hysteria. And hence also Paul's rhetorical exclamation, "But who are you, O *man*...?" In the face of the predestinating omnipotent God, Paul reminds the Romans that they are but mere men. The Humanist and the Arminian alike, both in denial of the predestinating God, are bereft (see Rushdoony & Scott, *The Great Christian Revolution*, for the political and cultural implications in history of Arminianism).

Let us then proclaim with David,

Arise, O LORD! Let not man prevail;
let the nations be judged before you!
Put them in fear, O LORD!
Let the nations know that they are but men! *Selah*

Psalm 9:19–20

Significantly, the apostle views the problem of evil – personified in Pharaoh as the god-king of the pagan power-state – not as a metaphysical one but as an ethical one. He does not attempt to explore the abstract nature of evil, but rather asserts the government of God over it. While God is not the author of evil, he uses Pharaoh and the power-state to fulfill his good purpose. And if an ethical one, it is also a covenantal one, as the ethical is but merely the law of the covenant. Despite the disruption of evil, he reasserts the creation covenant, the ultimacy of the transcendent Creator-God and his law-word over his creature. Against which our first parents rebelled, standing in judgement *over* God and believing the lie that they would be as gods.

Hence, Paul's OT similitude of the potter and the clay (Isa. 29:15-16; 45:9; 64:8-9; Jer. 18:1-6). His appeal to the right (*exousia*) of the potter *over* the clay – the Creator *over* the creature – represents the reversal of the root problem laid out at the very beginning of his epistle:

Therefore God gave them up ... because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Romans 1:24–25

Paul's Gospel apologetic, in the face of idolatry, is to proclaim the self-existence and ultimacy of the Creator-God—the transcendent God, who sovereignly predestines, from eternities past, all things according to the pleasure of his own will.

Romans 9-11, rather than merely an excursus, is, hence, the climax of the epistle.

For my comments on vv. 22-23 see v. 18 above. Suffice to say that in v. 22 the apostle is warning Israel that God's forbearance is not a guarantee of his favour, he is using them, like Pharaoh, in his predestinating purpose to call out a people "prepared beforehand for glory" from both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 23, 24).

Having reasserted the sovereignty of the Creator-God over men (as individuals: Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Pharaoh) and nations (of which Israel and Egypt are examples), as a potter over the clay (v. 21), Paul now returns to his original subject matter—his concern for the Jews and the harvest of the world, that is, to God's expansionary purpose of including the Gentiles in the *true* Israel of God (vv. 1-6).

As an aside, but by no means unimportant, God's predestinating decree over nations does not preclude that of individuals, as some Arminians attempt to argue (e.g., Roger T. Forster, *God's Strategy in Human History*). In other words, God predestines races and nations to salvation but not individual people. However, the testimony of Scripture shouts loud that God predestines down to the level of individual atoms, hence, even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matt. 10:30). As Paul taught in ch. 5, both Adam and Christ, as *individual* men, are in solidarity with a *corporate* people, a race. God's decrees govern the corporate because they also govern the personal. In God's redemptive economy, salvation is, therefore, effected in nations because God also calls and saves individuals. Thus, Paul's examples of Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and Pharaoh who are in solidary relationship with Israel and Egypt respectively. God elects nations, and he elects individuals.

The OT analogy of the potter, and especially Jeremiah 18:1-6, aptly paves the way for God's reshaping of Israel in the next passages—the vessel marred in God's hand, and yet now being reworked into another vessel, so as to comprise Jew and Gentile.

9:24-29—God's Calling of a New People: Israel and the Gentiles

24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? **25** As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" **26** "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" **27** And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, **28** for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." **29** And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."

Paul now returns from his parenthetical defence of God's sovereignty and freedom in vv. 14-23 to his biblical redefinition of Israel of vv. 6-13. God's sovereign election is the sole criterion of inclusion in the people of God. Instead of appealing to the Patriarchs to prove his thesis, as he did from vv. 6-13, he now turns to the Prophets, in vv. 25-29, to support his thesis of v. 24.

Verse 24 flows from v. 23b: "...vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory [sovereign election]—*even us whom he has called* [sovereign election], *not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?*" Paul is returning to the theme of God's faithfulness to the covenant, to his assertion of v. 6 that God's word has not failed, despite Israel's unbelief. To prove this, he has argued that there is an Israel within Israel, that natural descent does not define the *true* Israel. But rather, like Isaac and Jacob, while descended from Abraham physically, only "the children of the promise" are considered Abraham's *true* seed (vv. 7-8). As "vessels of mercy" they have been "called" by the free and determinative will of God before birth but made effectual in time (v. 11). A call which Paul underscored in 8:28-30 as the foundation for victory not only in eternity but also in history. And, furthermore, they have been "called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles."

Having corrected the Jewish self-perception earlier in his thesis, seeded in 2:28-29; 3:29 and 4:10-18, his argument is now flowering into full manifestation. Although, whereas in ch. 4 his concern was the justification of faith versus works, it is now the covenant. He is concerned to show the fruition of justification in the realised promise to Abraham that he would be the

father of many nations (4:17-18; Gen. 17:5). And so, he now argues that through the righteousness of faith God has the *sovereign right* to call *both Jews and Gentiles* as the true Israel (see comments v. 7). By doing so, God's word has not failed—he has proven himself faithful to the covenant.

Consequently, in vv. 25-29, Paul provides from the word of God prophetic testimony to the inclusion of the Gentiles (proving his thesis of v. 24 concerning the effectual *call*) and, hence, the reshaping of Israel from one vessel to another in the new administration of the covenant (see Jer. 18:1-6). The prophets have foretold the inclusion of the Gentiles so as to form, with the believing Jews, a new people of God.

In vv. 25-26, as an inspired author of Scripture, the apostle diverges from a strict verbatim citation from the prophet Hosea. The major difference is found in his rendering of “I will say” of Hosea 2:23 as, instead, “I will *call*”, using the Greek *kaleo*, once in each verse of vv. 25 and 26 (v. 26 cites Hosea. 1:10). Paul is at pains to underscore God's *sovereign election in the calling out of a people* from the Jews and Gentiles to himself. God's people are named (*kaleo*), or denominated, “my people” and “sons of the living God”, by virtue of his sovereign *calling*. See 8:28, 30; 9:7, 24 for Paul's use of *kaleo*.

Of strategic significance, we see the apostle's canonical authority in his appropriation of texts, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, from a context that otherwise applied to Israel and even changing the text from the original Hebrew and Greek versions of the OT. Hosea was originally prophesying God's mercy towards the rebellious northern house of Israel; though alienated from God they would be reincluded, despite their idolatry and waywardness. According to Paul, this now fits the case of the Gentiles, and is fulfilled in their inclusion through the Gospel.

This represents a major hermeneutical principle of the NT that confounds many of God's people, especially the popular evangelical mind and its literature. Scriptures otherwise applying to Israel are now, in the NT, applied to the Church, often provoking emotive accusations of so-called “Replacement Theology”, also known as supersessionism—that is, that the Church now replaces Israel. Another example of this NT phenomenon is Peter's appropriation of Exodus 19:5-6 (including Deut. 7:6; Isa. 43:21; Mal. 3:17; Isa. 61:6; 66:21), which clearly applied to OT Israel, for the NT Church: “you [NT believers] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). Another key example is the writer to the Hebrews equating OT Zion with the NT Church (12:18-24). Additionally, Stephen refers to Israel as the “church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), showing both the typological nature of OT Israel and also the oneness of the people of God—both OT and NT saints together now comprise the “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). Despite the claims that this is so-called Replacement Theology, Paul and the NT writers have unmistakably broadened the definition of the Church, demonstrating continuity between older and newer covenants.

This reaction to the prophetic and typological function of OT Israel foreshadowing the NT Church (see also 1 Cor. 10:6, 11), usually emanates from an underlying dispensationalism. Whether conscious or subliminal, it views the so-called Church Age as a parenthesis, a stop-gap measure, while God works out his problems with Israel. This approach holds that Christ came to his own (the Jews) and was rejected, the prophetic clock stopped, and the Kingdom was put on hold until the so-called Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming when the promised Millennial Age – the Kingdom Age – will be established. However, immediately prior to the Millennium, but after the Rapture, that is, during the future Tribulation of 7 years (or 3 ½ according to some), Antichrist and his minions rule supreme and Israel returns to the Lord and succeeds in what the church failed to do by preaching the Gospel to the nations, the 144,000 of Revelation materialising as 144,000 Jewish evangelists who complete the Great Commission. Nevertheless the Millennial or Kingdom Age is a Jewish one, with the Temple rebuilt and Christ ruling the world from Jerusalem.

Admittedly there are many permutations and modifications of this dispensational outline. For example, the more recent progressive dispensationalism, which is such a major modification it should, more accurately, be described as nondispensational historical premillennialism. In its appreciation of the nature of God's progressive revelation through each covenant, culminating in the seed of Abraham, Christ, it has more in common with covenant theology than traditional dispensationalism.

At the end of this section we will assess, in light of our exegesis of chs. 9-11, dispensationalism and related issues, including two-covenant theories and the Israel-Church distinction, particularly as it relates to the ethnic people and the land promises.

Suffice to say at this juncture that the dispensational scheme relegates the OT Scriptures exclusively to ethnic Israel as the prime agent of God's purposes. The church is not foreshadowed in the prophets and is merely God's Plan B, awaiting Israel's

return from her current apostasy. He will then reactivate Plan A—Israel. This creates a definitive disjunction between Israel and the Church as two completely distinct entities in God’s plan. And, pertinent to vv. 25-26, creates an insurmountable exegetical dilemma when the NT writers wrest OT scriptures from their original Jewish context and apply them to the Church. This being the case, there is clearly a flaw in the dispensational hermeneutic.

Nevertheless, the orthodox doctrine of inspiration asserts that both the OT and NT writers wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), and as a result the Scriptures are without error, for God himself is without error, perfect in all his ways. Hence, Paul is not in error when he applies scriptures originally given for Israel to the Church. Integral to this doctrine is the unity of God. God is one and, therefore, is not in conflict with himself. He has one mind, one will, and one purpose. The nature of God thus underlies the unity of the covenants, with the one purpose and mind of God flowing through them, administering the *one* promise through *various* administrations, from Adam through Abraham and Moses to Christ (see comments on [3:2, 21, 28-30](#) for the unity of God and of the covenants). In turn, this then underlies the unity of the Scriptures, of the OT and NT as one unified and progressive revelation. They are not in conflict. Clearly, therefore, the prophetic scriptures have a double application: to the immediate OT historical situation of Israel and to the future NT Church (see Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*). Furthermore, this then is the basis for the *one* people of God, which is the apostle’s central assertion of ch. 9—that God has the sovereign right to call out a people from *both* Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, natural descent is not, and never was, the basis of covenant membership. Rather it is the sovereign election of God, plus nothing.

Returning again to the text. In vv. 27-28 Paul adduces Isaiah 10:22-23 to support his thesis of v. 6 that not all who are of Israel are Israel, and then amplified in v. 24 that God calls his people not only from the Jews but also the Gentiles. This consequently implies that the covenant promise did not guarantee salvation to all ethnic Israel. Accordingly, Paul’s Isaianic witness proclaims that, despite Israel’s great multitude, only a “remnant” will be saved (v. 27). The context, however, is God’s judgement on Israel through Assyria (Isa. 10:5). History later records that the northern kingdom (the ten tribes) all but disappeared through the Assyrian defeat and captivity apart from a remnant that Isaiah predicted would return to “the mighty God” (Isa. 10:21). At the behest of Hezekiah, a small group did, in fact, turn back to the Lord, escaping to Jerusalem from Samaria to celebrate the Passover (2 Chron. 30:1, 5-9, 11-12, 18, 25-26). As v. 28 declares, the judgement was complete and rapid, occurring several years after Isaiah’s prophecy: “for the Lord will carry out his sentence [*logos*] upon the earth fully and without delay”.

So, here is the rub: prophecies that applied to Israel eight hundred years prior are now, in Paul’s generation, applied to God’s present judgement on Israel. Furthermore, they are used to confirm that not all Jews are Israel, that a remnant is called out from natural Israel to join with the Gentiles in forming the *true* spiritual Israel of God (see 2:28-29). This is scandalous to the Jewish mind, and provoked their ire upon Paul. Nevertheless, he forthrightly but patiently expounds the Scriptures to bring them into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

Like Isaiah, Paul, as a prophet, prosecutes the covenant lawsuit against his own people (see comments on the Covenant Lawsuit at [2:1-4:25—Judgement & Justification: Justice Promised](#); [3:21-31—The Justice of God & Justification by Faith Alone](#); [4:23-25—The Faith of Abraham & the Believer](#); [5:20](#); [8:1](#); [8:15](#)). He is pronouncing the sanctions of the covenant upon them: curses upon the unbelieving and blessings upon the remnant. In v. 28 the Lord’s “sentence” is about to be executed. The ESV translators have rendered this from the Greek *logos*, meaning “word”. God’s covenant promises, or *word*, including his covenant threats, are about to be enacted upon Israel. Moreover, in v. 28 this “sentence” is upon the “earth”, in Greek *ge*, which is equally rendered as “land”. In his magisterial commentary on the book of Revelation, David Chilton points out that

St. John uses the expression **those who dwell in the Land [*ge*]** twelve times in Revelation (once for each of the twelve tribes) to refer to *apostate Israel* (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 14:6; 17:2, 8). In the Greek Old Testament (the version used by the early Church), it is a common prophetic expression for *rebellious, idolatrous Israel about to be destroyed and driven from the Land* (Jer. 1:14; 10:18; Ezek. 7:7; 36:17; Hosea. 4:1, 3; Joel 1:2, 14; 2:1; Zeph. 1:18), based on its original usage in the historical books of the Bible for *rebellious, idolatrous pagans about to be destroyed and driven from the Land* (Num. 32:17; 33:52, 55; Josh. 7:9; 9:24; Judg. 1:32; 2 Sam.. 5:6; 1 Chron 11:4; 22:18; Neh. 9:24); Israel has become a nation of pagans, and is about to be destroyed, exiled, and supplanted by a new nation, the Church.

Israel is about to be driven from the land in AD 70, a mere fifteen years after Paul’s epistle. In Matthew 23, with his

seven “Woes” (vv. 13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29), pronounced upon Israel’s leadership, Jesus reiterates the *sevenfold* punishment of Leviticus 26 (vv. 18, 21, 24, 28), which is asserted as the covenant threat *four* times, being the biblical number of the *earth* or the *Land*, for example: *four* rivers flowed out of Eden to water the whole earth (Gen. 2:10); the earth or the Land, like the brazen altar, and table of shewbread are represented as having *four* corners (Isa. 11:12; see also Exod. 25:26; 27:1-2), from which the *four* winds blow (Jer. 49:36); and finally, the encampment of Israel was positioned on the *four* sides of the tabernacle (Num. 2). And so, with *seven* being the biblical number of completion, Jesus’ seven *Woes* are, in effect, pronounced upon the inhabitants of the Land, indicating that the complete and final judgement of God is about to fall upon Israel.

Because Israel has not listened to the prophets sent to her, so as to fill up their iniquity, Jesus pronounces in Matthew 23 that he is about to send for the final time “prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town” (v. 34, see also v. 35). Of which, Paul is the prime example. Jesus, as the covenant enforcer, then announces that these events and cataclysmic judgements are imminent, and that God’s glory is being withdrawn from Israel:

Truly, I say to you, *all these things will come upon this generation.*

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! *See, your house is left to you desolate.*

Matthew 23:34–38 (author’s emphasis)

And then in his Olivet discourse of Matthew 24, Jesus then pronounces the imminent destruction of the Temple (vv. 1-2), his coming in judgement in the clouds to end the older covenant age (v. 3, 14, 27, 30, 37), and the Tribulation of the Roman siege (v. 28; Luke 21:20) and final fall of Jerusalem (vv. 4-14) that history records occurred in AD 67-70, predicting that “*this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place” (v. 34). And then, in v. 35 he culminates the Olivet pronouncements with a covenant oath that “Heaven and earth will pass away, but *my words* will not pass away”—that is, the “sentence”, or covenant sanctions, of Romans 9:28 that “the Lord will carry out ... upon the earth [land] *fully and without delay.*”

In v. 29, Paul then underscores the retributive context of God’s preservation of a remnant, citing Isaiah 1:9: “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring [seed], we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.” In other words, if God had not preserved a “seed” from the Jews through the Gospel, they would have been utterly destroyed under his judicial wrath. Paul is returning to vv. 7-9 where he has strategically redefined the promise not as a natural seed but a spiritual one.

Apart from the spiritual “seed”, Israel would have been like Sodom in its utter destruction. In fact, John, in the book of Revelation, refers to “the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8), identifying Jerusalem as so immoral and idolatrous that she is now no longer the city of God but Sodom—an “abomination” fit for destruction, the word applying only to the grossest immorality and idolatry (see Gen. 19:23-29; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Ezek. 16:50-52). Indeed, Jerusalem and Israel have rendered themselves so abominable in the sight of God that the Holy Place is now handed over to an abomination—a pagan idol in AD 70, fulfilling Jesus’ and Daniel’s prophecies of the “abomination of desolation” (Matt. 24:15; Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Luke’s account of the Olivet discourse informs us that Jesus warned, “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (21:20). History records that this was the *Roman* armies, with Josephus adding that upon the fall of the city the Roman army laid their ensigns, bearing the images of eagles and of Caesar, within the Temple by the eastern gate, to which they then offered sacrifice (Kik, pp. 102-4). The Jewish leaders, who forty years earlier, had already declared their allegiance to the pagan power state (in defiance of the King of kings himself), “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15), are now forced to eat the bitter fruit of their national betrayal.

So, Israel’s house has been forsaken by God and left “desolate” (Matt. 23:28). “Desolation” is the language of de-creation; being related to the same word groups as desert, wilderness and waste, Israel, once the Garden of the Lord, has now become a howling waste and wilderness (see Deut. 32:10; Isa. 51:3; 64:10; Jer. 9:10, 12; 12:10; 23:10; Ezek. 6:14; Hosea. 2:3; Joel 2:3; 3:19). It is no longer God’s house, but their own—the temple of *autonomous man*. The autonomy and self-righteousness of the Jews is an abomination to God: “You are those who *justify yourselves* before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is

exalted among men is an *abomination* in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15, author’s emphasis).

Nevertheless, while Israel and the old covenant economy is being de-created, God calls forth a new creation, “created in righteousness” (Eph. 4:24 NASB; see also Rom. 1:17; 2 Pet. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:17). Through a believing “remnant” (v. 28), or a “seed” (v. 29), a new Israel is called out under a new and better economy (see Heb. 7:22; 8:6, 8). And this now includes Gentiles. So, in this new creation, the Garden of the Lord is now being re-established so as to fill the whole earth through a new humanity (ch. 5:12-21)—the “one new man” of Ephesians 2:14-16. Chapter 11 will pick up this hope for Israel, Paul’s “kinsmen according to the flesh” (v. 3).

As we step into the next section, v. 30 is a more natural break than 10:1, with, “What shall we say, then?”, marking a transition in the apostle’s argument, as it does elsewhere in Romans (4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14). It serves to focus on the main thrust of the chapter (9:6-13, 24-29). Unlike its surrounding passages (9:1-29; 11:1-26), Paul will utilise in this one (9:30–10:21) the words “righteousness” and “faith”, so as to rightly understand the cause of the Jewish predicament.

[Part 6: Introduction—Disobedience & Dispossession: Covenant Administered](#)

Part 6a: Chapter 9:1-29—Covenant Predestined

Part 6b: Chapter 9:30-10:21—Covenant Continued

Part 6c: Chapter 11:1-36—Covenant Consummated

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