

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.

“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)

“Just as Christ accepted us:” the foundation of the exhortation (1-11)

- I. Prologue, 1:1-17
- II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20
- III. The Universality of Divine Righteousness for the Jew and Gentile: Justification, 3:21-4:25
- IV. The Assurance of God’s Righteousness: Progressive and Final Sanctification
- V. The Vindication of God’s Righteousness: His Promises to Israel, 9:1-11:36

On the surface, chapters 9-11 seem to be an interlude between 1-8 and 12-16. It is not a parenthesis; it is integral to Paul’s overall argument concerning the gospel. The backdrop of his presentation of the gospel is the controversy in the early church of the relationship in Christianity to Judaism and the relationship of the Gentile and Jew in a new entity, the church. Many of the Jews had rejected Christ. Now, promises made to the Jews have been given to the Gentiles. Jewish rejection and Gentile acceptance of the gospel leaves Paul with a lot of explaining to do. Paul could have argued that the church has displaced Israel in God’s program, but he does not (incorporation, not substitution). These chapters contribute to Paul’s exposition of the gospel by showing that it provides fully for God’s promises to Israel when those promises are rightly understood. Here is the question: Is the gospel a betrayal of Old Testament biblical Judaism or a fulfillment of it?

The rhetorical character of *Romans* is particularly evident in these chapters. The apostle anticipates questions, states them, and answers them. Is Paul’s gospel true? If salvation is by grace through the elective purposes of God, why did He reject Israel? What does this teach us about God’s faithfulness? Does God cancel His promises because of unbelief? Has God failed in His program? If God forsook His ancient people, will He forsake Gentile believers? Can they count on His promises?

The apostle’s answer is threefold: (1) Israel’s failure is not to be traced to divine unfaithfulness to His promises (9-10); (2) Israel’s failure is not complete, because He has a remnant (11:1-10) and (3) a time is coming when Israel will be saved (11:11-27), a fact that is part of the overall plan for the ages (11:28-32).

Another way of thinking about this three-chapter unit, and generally one that I will follow, is this:

Ch.9: The divine perspective of Israel

Ch.10: The human perspective upon Israel
Ch.11: The future reality for Israel

Each of the three chapters (9-11) begins in the same way, that is, with the expression of personal feelings and personal perspectives by the apostle.

You might think of this section as an elaboration of 3:1-8, “What advantage then has the Jew?”

A. The problem: Israel’s rejection and the divine perspective, 9:1-33

1. The reaction of Paul to Israel’s rejection, vv. 1-3

a. The declaration of it, vv. 1-2

These verses are a single sentence; it is Paul’s anguished cry for the Jewish people. The intensity of his emotional state in this regard is evident in the trilogy of phrases, the repetition, to make a point. His insights are consistent with the apostolic message (“in Christ”); he confirms what he said is not a distortion of anything previously stated. Finally, that the torment of his conscience is consistent with the internal witness of the Spirit of God.

b. The intensity of it, v. 3

Paul’s emotional intensity is a beautiful picture of the soul winner. It is mirrored in Moses’ anguish cry for his people in the Kadesh-Barnea episode (Exod. 32:30-35) and in John Knox, the Scottish reformer, when he cried out to God, “Give me Scotland or I’ll die.” The apostle felt so deeply for his people that, if separation from God meant their inclusion, he would be willing to be separated (as if we had a choice in the matter!). This is a statement of Paul’s care, not a possibility.

The term “cursed” or “cut off” is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. It can indicate a death oath (Acts 23:14), an oath in the manner of swearing (Mark 14:71), or a giving over of someone or something to the judgment or destruction of God (Gal. 1:8-9). The meaning here is most likely the latter sense.

The passionate concern of the apostle for the Jews is found in another trilogy: “my people,” “my race,” “the people of Israel.”

2. The explanation of Paul’s emotions, vv. 4-5

The explanation of the apostle’s emotional heartbreak has to do with Israel’s great blessings from God; he lists eight in all. In part, this passage echoes what the apostle has said in 3:1-2; it answers the question, “What is the advantage of the Jew?” Here the advantage is enumerated as blessings. They have been so blessed; Paul wishes that God would bless them once more. Israel did a poor job of responding to the Old Covenant mercies of God and even greater failure to the New Covenant fulfillment of them in Jesus. Paul’s sorrow does not emerge so much from the fact of their ingratitude and failures as the bounty and beauty of God’s grace.

a. The adoption of Israel, v. 4a

God called Israel His firstborn son (Exod. 4:22); they are His chosen people. However, they are not identified as “adopted” within OT literature or Judaism.

The major metaphor for salvation in Pauline literature is “adoption,” while in Peter and John its “born again.” These terms are similar and are family oriented. “Adoption” is Roman rather than Jewish in heritage. “Adoption” is a term from the courtroom or legal procedure. Once a person was “adopted,” the person was considered a new person who could not be disowned or killed by their adoptive father.

b. The glory of Israel, v. 4b

Glory literally means “weighty or heavy,” suggestive of that which is valuable. “The glory of Israel” refers to the revelation of God to His people. Here, it refers to God’s revelation of Himself at Mount Sinai, as well as the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led the people in the wilderness sojourn. It refers to the presence of God among His people. God’s presence is referred to as His glory (I Kings 8:10-11, Ezek. 1:28).

c. The covenant(s) with Israel, v.4c

The first consideration at this point is to determine if the noun is singular or plural (covenant or covenants). In some of our earliest manuscripts, it is singular in number while others the plural form occurs. The term is never in the plural in the OT though it does appear plural in the NT.

If plural (covenants), since the law is subsequently mentioned, the reference is likely to the three great unconditional covenants: Abrahamic, Davidic, and New. The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3) consist of three promises to Israel: a land (shadowed in Palestine, realized in heaven), a seed (shadowed in wise, benevolent rulers, realized in the Messiah), and a blessing (shadowed in material blessings in the land, realized in the blessing of redemption in heaven). The Davidic Covenant revealed a shadowed king that prefigured the true king, Jesus Christ. The New Covenant promised the king to be the redeemer.

If singular (covenant) the references are likely to the Abrahamic Covenant that encapsulates all subsequent covenants.

d. The gift of the law to Israel, v. 4d

When God’s law was given at Mount Sinai, the people rejoiced because of the revelation in it of God’s righteousness and justice. (They also trembled in fear of God’s holiness.)

e. The gift of the priesthood to Israel, v. 4e

The development of Temple worship, its predecessor being the Tabernacle and wilderness sojourn experience, symbolized the presence of God. The people had the privilege of the presence beyond that extended to any other people group (they possessed only natural revelation and a twisted conscience).

f. The reception of promises producing hope, v. 4f

In essence through the Hebrew Scriptures, promises concerning the future were given. Since “the covenant(s)” were mentioned earlier, this principally speaks of the coming of the Promised One (Deut. 18:15, 18-19).

The promise of Messiah is initially mentioned in the promise of Genesis 3:15, progressively unfolded in the Hebrew Scriptures and revealed in the Greek Scriptures.

- g. The fathers or leaders of Israel, v. 5a
Good leaders are a blessing from God. The term “Patriarch” literally means “fathers.” It is the designation given by God to Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob (the major characters in Gen 12-50 and the ancestors of the nation of Israel). See Exod. 3:15-16, Deut. 1:8, Ps. 105:9-10. The promises of God to bless the world through this ancient Semite were initially given to Abraham (Gen. 12, 15,17) and repeated progressively to Isaac and Jacob.
- h. The lineage of the deliverer, the Messiah, v. 5b
The supreme privilege for Israel was that out of them came the Messiah, but they, with the Gentiles, crucified Him.

This text contains an affirmation of the deity of the Son of God. He is “God over all, blessed forever.” Grammatically, the phrase can refer to God or to Christ depending on punctuation. The context is not of a blessing; it is a lament over failed blessings. Because the Messiah is God, the failure is catastrophic.

- 3. The answer of God: distinguishing grace, vv. 6-13
 - a. God’s selective purposes, vv. 6-8
 - 1) The Word of God and God’s purpose, v. 6
The “word of God” in this context refers to the covenantal promises given to Abraham. Israel’s failure was rooted in a failure to read the Bible correctly. If they had, they would have realized that God’s promises were not meant for the entirety of Israel, but the remnant according to faith. As Stott has commented, “There have always been two Israel’s....” There is natural Israel reflected in Ishmael and Esau and the Israel of promise seen in Isaac and Jacob!
 - 2) The seed of Abraham and God’s purpose, v. 7
Because Abraham had a son, Ishmael, does not mean that he is the heir of the promise. It is “in Isaac” (Gen. 21:12) that the blessing would come. Israel’s unbelief from a divine perspective arose from the fact that all of Abraham’s offspring were not included in the promise (“in Isaac”).
 - 3) The underlying principle, v. 8
Paul’s point is that it is God’s choice that makes an heir, not genetics! Ishmael was connected to Abraham by natural descent, Isaac by ancestry and spiritual promise. What counts is grace, not race!
 - b. Examples of distinguishing grace, vv. 9-12
Paul reaches his conclusions about distinguishing grace from his understanding of Scripture.

- 1) Ishmael and Isaac, v. 9

The word, “promise,” is in the emphatic position in the verse. The illustration of Ishmael and Isaac was hinted in verse 7. The citation here is from Gen. 18:10. God chose Isaac, not Ishmael; the promises would be granted to Sarah’s offspring, not Hagar’s. Ishmael had twelve sons before Isaac had any!
- 2) Esau and Jacob, vv. 10-12

A person might suggest that God did not choose Ishmael because he was not technically a child of Sarah. Here Paul makes his point by going another step. Sarah’s son, Isaac, had twins; God chose one, not the other while in the womb of Rebekah. The eldest would serve the youngest. Normal human preferences have nothing to do with God’s choice. Born of the same mother, sharing the same father, and conceived at the same point in time, neither of the twins had a better claim to the divine promise as a birthright than the other.

 - (a) The blessing of twins, v. 10

It is interesting that the wives of the patriarchs struggled with fertility (Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel); they could not conceive (Abraham and Jacob being quite fertile!). Human disappointment was the way God chose to make it clear who was in control of the covenant promises. Sarah birthed a son in old age, Rachel after four by her sister and one by her sister’s maid (also Zilpah).
 - (b) The distinguishing of the twins, v. 11

The choice of Jacob over Esau as the true seed of Abraham was not based on foreseen faith or works. Stifler notes, “Human merit, present or foreseen, does not enter into God’s choice.”
 - (c) The selection of one twin, v. 12

God’s choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with works, but all with the call of God.
- c. Proof text of distinguishing grace, v. 13

The citation is from Malachi 1:2. The context of the verse is God’s defense of His love for Israel, reminding them of the distinction He made throughout history between Israel (Jacob) and Esau. The destinies of Esau and Jacob were appointed.

The word, “hate,” does not suggest personal animosity; it is a Hebrew idiom of comparison. It admittedly sounds harsh; perhaps another word should have been employed by our translators to convey the nuance. Says Mounce, “The strong contrast is a Semitic idiom that heightens the comparison by stating it in absolute terms.” A comparison of Luke 14:26 with Matt. 10:37 indicates that the term means, “to love less.” This definition is the same as in the context of the original story (Gen. 29:30-33), “to prefer another.” The term suggests a differentiation, not a moral judgment. Moral judgment is based on moral distinction; in this case, there was none. Both boys were less than godly. Murray stated it this way, “We must, therefore, recognize that there is in God a holy hate that cannot be defined in terms of not loving or loving less.”

Parenthesis: Is election corporate or individual?

In the OT God's election is primarily His "calling out" of a people for His own name's sake." Would not Paul be thinking in the same terms here? I do not think so.

- *Esau and Jacob are individuals; he mentions their births and works (vv.10-11). This can hardly be applied to a nation.*
- *Words and phrases in this passage (such as election, call, not of works), he uses elsewhere of those who attain salvation (9:28-30). Esau did not attain to it. Nations and peoples, even Israel, will not universally come to redemption.*
- *It is not the purpose of this paragraph to show how God calls nations to Himself. The point of the passage is that God is always faithful to His people. Since most of Israel remains in unbelief, he states that the OT justifies discrimination within physical Israel in terms of enjoyment of salvation. God did not choose to call the nation and has not proven unfaithful; He called a remnant according to faith!*

4. Objections answered, vv. 14-29

These verses are a detour from the main trajectory of Paul's thought. He does so because he knows that his insistence on God's initiative in determining who should be saved and who rejected will meet with questions and even objections.

a. Is there unrighteousness with God? The right to select, vv. 14-18

1) The question and answer, v. 14

How can God find fault if He acts in such a discriminatory fashion? God chose Jacob and rejected Esau for no assignable reason outside His own will. Is God to be faulted for His actions? No!

Parenthesis: The problem of sovereignty and freedom, culpability without ability, a centuries old discussion.

What does human freedom consist of? All human beings possess the ability to make choices; unsaved and saved alike have freedom, but the nature of freedom is different. Freedom simply is the ability to make choices; however, there are two qualifications. You must know that the option exists, and you must perceive it as desirable. The unbeliever does not desire the Lord because the inadequate knowledge they possess through conscience and nature is enough to make God undesirable. All have freedom but freedom is limited to the objects to choose from and a desire to do so. Because of the rejection of the knowledge of God that all possess, while not sufficient to save, is sufficient to condemn justly if rejected (and all do without divine grace and mercy revealing the beauty and sufficiency of God in Christ). The deep question is this: why does God open some eyes to Christ and not to others or all? Paul's answer is that it is none of our business to judge God for what He does because He is righteous, and no mere mortal should question the propriety of His actions. See 9:20-21. What we do know is that God loved us

before we loved Him and that our love for Him could not be the cause of His grace since grace preceded our love.

2) The proof (Exodus 33:19), v. 15

God does not harden a person unless he/she hardens his/her heart (which is the constant state of mankind). God does withhold preserving mercies, but He does not judge to judge. God allows people to do what they desire sometimes so that He can exercise just judgment. God gave people over to their own depravity (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Justification for this is found in God's word to Moses, a revelation of one of God's basic characteristics: His freedom to bestow mercy on whomever He chooses.

3) The inference, v. 16

"So then" ("Therefore" [NIV]) indicates a consequence. Salvation is not by human prowess; it is through divine grace (John 6:44). "Willing" and "running" may indicate the possession of grace, never the cause of grace.

4) The illustration, v.17

The citation is from Exod. 9:17-18. God revealed His power to Pharaoh by hardening his heart after the sixth plague (boils). If God does not grant mercy, He leaves people hardened in sin. Though the Exodus narrative indicates that Pharaoh hardened his own heart ten times, Paul makes no mention of it. However, hardening may never be abstracted from the guilt of which it is the wages. God does not act apart from His justice that demands punishment for wrongdoing unless in mercy He grants pardon.

It is important to observe that God's actions toward Pharaoh were acts of mercy with a purpose, the glory of God. God revealed His strength, far greater than the gods of Egypt, so that Egypt would come to know it, submit to it, and proclaim it. Instead, he rejected the revelation of God, refused to humble himself, and faced inevitable destruction.

5) The conclusion, v. 18

God does as He pleases and is uninfluenced by the "merits" or demerits of people. The point of the Exodus story is that God brought Pharaoh to prominence ("raised up") for a negative rather than a positive purpose. Says Murray, "Sovereignty pure and simple is the only reason for the differentiation by which some are consigned to hardening while others equally ill-deserving is made vessels of mercy."

b. Why does God blame mankind for doing what He wills them to do? This is duty and responsibility without ability (vv. 19-29).

1) The question, v.19

The question assumes that God is responsible for man's lost condition. Paul has in mind the arrogant Jew of his day ("who withstands [or, resists] His will" is a verbal tense that indicates ongoing, habitual action, not isolated events).

2) The apostle's illustrative answer, vv. 20-21

a) Paul's rejoinder, v. 20a

The answer is simply that the creature has no right to doubt the ways of the creator.

b) Paul's reminder: the potter and clay, vv. 20b-21

The potter can shape clay as he wishes! Paul is asserting that God has a right to make from the mass of humanity ("the clay") some who are destined for heaven and some who are not.

3) The apostle's theological answer, vv. 22-29

a) To display His mercy there must be a display of justice, vv. 22-23

Human beings will never comprehend these matters. Without explanation, here is the obvious. God is a coterie of perfections that is commonly called attributes. Among His attributes are justice, power, and mercy. Justice demands the outpouring of wrath for violation; power executes it. How could He ever display this perfection without revealing His justice? If there was no justice and judgment in God, there could be no mercy; mercy is the grace not to extend just judgment.

Most "if" clauses are followed by a conclusion, but v. 22 does not. The "if" is a first-class condition, meaning Paul assumes what he says is true, but no conclusion follows. "Vessels of wrath" continues the clay-potter metaphor of vv. 20-21. Rejection and rebellion against the Lord will find its recompense in the Day of Judgment, but God uses such to accomplish His purposes.

The phrase "prepared for wrath (NASB, NKJV)" is a little misleading. Grammatically, it is better translated "ready or ripe for wrath" meaning a current state previously formed, but without assigning a cause. See 1:18-32. The voice of the verb is passive, though some would see it as middle (something caused by the person, not brought upon the person). The middle voice of this verb is rare in the NT and nowhere used in this manner. The tense of the verb indicates an accomplished reality and the passive nature of "prepared" is sustained by the potter-clay image.

b) The extensive display of His grace, v. 24

The point of this verse is that God's promises find fulfillment beyond Israeli ethnicity. God's elective grace is without limitation; all are undeserving and helpless. God chose to draw out vessels of wrath to become vessels to convey His glory and grace. The call and covenant with Abraham involved more than Semites, but all of mankind.

c) The textual basis of the display of His grace, vv. 25-29

The pattern of God's action is discriminatory. It is not graceless because God could have justly let the whole lot of us remain lost. He chose from the needy to express grace to some, not all, when He was required to have none. We must embrace and live with what God did

for myriads rather than what He did not do for others. There is no discernible reason for His discriminatory action; clearly the saved are not more impressive than the unsaved before God extended unwarranted mercy.

(1) Hosea 2:23 and 1:10, vv. 25-26

The point of combining these verses is to show that God predicted the call of the Gentiles. Originally, the call was given to the ten tribes (in Hosea, the northern kingdom of Israel), but as they had been excluded from the nation and were practically heathen, Paul refers to them as a type of the call of the Gentiles. The OT predicts that a “new Israel” will find fulfillment in the church, the gathering of Jews and Gentiles in a new body.

(2) Isaiah 10:22-23, vv. 27-28

Paul uses this passage to show that God only intended to redeem some from national Israel to be His “true Israel.” It is in this way that Paul reconciles the promises of God to Israel and the small number of Jewish Christians in his day, a day when most Jews refused Jesus as their promised deliverer.

(3) Isaiah 1:9, v. 29

The quotation of this passage provides a note of hope that prepares the reader for chapter 11. “Unless the Lord of Hosts left us survivors....” The whole did not come to faith, but always a part would. “Lord of Sabaoth (Lord of Hosts)” indicates a military sense of control.

The reference to two of the cities judged by God for its wickedness (Gen. 19:24-26) is a reminder that without the intervention of grace only destruction follows. In Sodom and Gomorrah, He did not for those Gentiles, and deservingly so; to the righteous, though vexed Lot, he did undeservingly so. Without the intervention of grace, there is only judgment.

c. What shall we say then? God’s rights, vv. 30-33

These verses are a summary of chapter 9 and an introduction to chapter 10. In the case of Jews and Gentiles, only those who embrace the promises of God by faith inherit them.

1) The facts, vv. 30-31

Salvation is by divine grace, but people are lost by reason of sin. Gentiles found what they were not seeking (Rom. 3:11); Israel sought it in the wrong way. Our separation from God is such that we cannot bridge the chasm. God choose to bring us to Himself the only way possible, by doing it Himself. Our only responsibility is to be willing to accept by faith that Christ has accomplished what we cannot.

2) The cause, vv. 32-33

Israel failed ["stumbled"] to receive the promise because they sought it by works, not faith. The Scriptures, which the Jew profess to be true, affirms this very thing. Again, had the Jews believed their own Scriptures, they would have understood that Israel was never intended to be the entire "nation," the people of God.

The "stone" image is taken from Isa. 8:14 and 28:16. Israel's stumbling over Christ was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures!

Israel's unbelief and rejection by God can be explained. It is the nation's fault, not God's. Israel pursued righteousness in the wrong way, by works, not faith. The chapter began with God's purpose in election and ends by attributing Israel's fall to her own pride.

Applications:

1. When the apostle wanted to certify his great desire for the salvation of his people, he made two claims as to its truthfulness. The first was that it was consistent with Christian belief so this became an appeal to external, divine authority. The second was to a clean personal conscience in saying so, an internal witness. Can you make the same claims for the veracity of what you tell people? Do your feelings and instructions align with the truth of our faith? Can you say what you say with an unsullied conscience? If not, what do you suggest doing about it?
2. Membership in the Lord's outward church does not mean that we are necessarily members of the true family of God through faith in Christ. The Jew was particularly blessed as our previous passage detailed with the promises and presence of God, yet they responded in unbelief for the greatness of all gifts He sent their way. Proximity to God's mercies does not indicate nor imply the possession of God's mercies. The Jew was and is so near, but so very far away. Do you not have friends and family that are in this category? The Jew possessed the sign of the covenant, but it was only in the flesh, not the heart. You can be surrounded by great riches and never enter them. Are you surrounded by good things that you have not possessed because of unbelief? What about peace and contentment for instance?
3. Before we too quickly condemn Israel for failing to make use of her privileges and enter the blessings of God, let us pause to reflect on the privileges and blessings God has bestowed upon us in Christ. Have we fully entered God's blessings? Have we been good stewards of the blessings and opportunities He has bestowed upon us? If not, then we are no better than the nation Israel. Perhaps no other people have been given more privileges and opportunities than we who believe in Jesus Christ today. There is a coming day when God will turn once more open the hearts of His ancient people. This is the era of blessing on Gentiles, though not exclusively. Are we taking advantage of God's blessing to present the gospel or are we using it for our advantage?
4. If you ever had the notion that God's faithfulness was dependent on our faithfulness, that blessing came after merit, all you must do is think about the patriarchs through whom the promise came. It cannot be said that any were of sterling character: Abraham was a liar that got His wife into a harem in Egypt and again with Abimelech, caring more for his safety than

his wife's. Isaac was a deceiver from the womb and Jacob tolerated the idols of Rachel. God's favor is rooted in His own desires, not human merit. If blessings were a reward for merit, if blessings could be purchased by the "cash" of obedience, we would all be impoverished instead of inheritors of the grace and mercies of God. God chooses to make trophies of grace out of lumps of clay!

5. God raises up horrible tyrants and dictators to display His glory through them by demonstrating His great strength in destroying them. Murderous potentates have marched across the pages of history making outrageous demands, causing death and chaos, but they eventually vanished. God raises up tyrants and, in His time, takes them down. He has worked out His perfect will with perfect timing though you and I cannot grasp the half of it. God allows tyrants to be successful only to a point so that people can see human greatness and then be amazed at God's ability to bring them to their knees. We must not fear tyrants; their time is limited and purposeful. We must fear God who alone has our souls while others only have our bodies.
6. It is possible to pursue the right things but do so ignorantly; it is possible to do the right things for the wrong reasons. Israel was right in recognizing the importance of the law, though they sought it inappropriately. They were right to connect the law with salvation, but erred in thinking legal righteousness was the way to obtain it while its function was to demonstrate the need for a redeemer. What was meant to point to the need of a savior became the means of salvation. Sadly, they twisted and misinterpreted the law to such a degree that they thought they fulfilled it and, thus, inherited redemption. Do you know people who are doing the same thing as the ancient Jews? Faith and human merit are strictly antithetical when the subject is salvation.
7. The only assurance of salvation that we have is that God does as He pleases. If He made choices based on our worth, no one would have hope of salvation. If He made the choice because of our consistent regard for Him, we would be without hope. It is only love that gives when offended, cares when violated. God's love for us is rooted in His character, flowing from it, not because of gratitude for our compliance. God loves as we should love.