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# **God's Vindication of His Dealing with the Jews**

**Romans 9 – 11**

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## God's Vindication of His Dealing with the Jews

This is a difficult and often misunderstood section of Romans. Many of Calvinism's champions allegedly find support for unconditional election here and others believe Paul teaches that Israel must be restored as a physical nation. Careful scrutiny of what Paul actually says, however, will prove how specious these arguments are.

Paul said in the theme statement of the letter (1:16) that the gospel is the power to save for the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. He points to promises made through Abraham and his descendants to show how God's plan to save man is a plan of "righteousness by faith" apart from law. Salvation is "of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22) but it no longer is achieved through the law (Paul's argument up to now is that salvation never has been achieved through law).

But this creates a problem: if salvation is not now realized through the Jews and their religion, what place do they have in God's scheme of redemption? What will become of Israel? These chapters address that question. Tension between Jews and Gentiles was still a potential (and often, very real) problem in the churches of the first century. Paul goes to great pains to explain why Israel – as a nation – is no longer the conveyor of God's righteousness and how Israel can be saved. Paul concludes that they are saved just like Gentiles.

We will achieve greater success in understanding this chapter if we remember that Paul is discussing the community as a whole, not individuals. He is seeking to demonstrate why Israel (generally) has been rejected by God. Also, he is discussing spiritual matters here. Paul is not concerned with Israel as a nation – he never mentions them as such and never even hints at a future "kingdom of Israel" to be restored in Palestine. His concern is with the spiritual condition of Israel (9:1–3; 10:1–3).

## Romans 9:1–5

Paul expresses extreme sorrow over the self-imposed condemnation of his fellow Israelites, even to the extent of saying that he would volunteer to be “accursed from Christ” if it would serve to save them (vv. 1–3).

He proceeds to name the privileges and the great honor that God showered on Israel. To them, he says, belongs the **adoption** – God chose them, not because they were worthy among all other people, but because He loved them and had a plan for them; He made them into His family (cf. Dt. 7:7–8). The **glory** of God was with them, in the cloud and the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21–22) and in other appearances of God to His people throughout history. Also to Israel was given the **covenants**, first to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1ff.; 17:1ff.) then repeated it to Isaac, Jacob and David (2 Sam. 7:12–17). Even the covenant name, Yahweh, was given to Israel alone.

The **service of God** refers to the works of the Levitical priesthood in serving in the temple, the “place” where God would meet His people (see Dt. 12:1ff; Heb. 9:1–10). And to Israel first came all the **promises** of God, from His promise to Abraham onward (cf. Heb. 6:13–18). The **fathers** came through Israel and it was from Israel that **Christ came, according to the flesh**. Israel was greatly privileged to be the conveyor of such tremendous blessings and yet they have turned their back on the “eternally blessed God,” Jesus Christ.

It is because of this rejection that Paul writes these chapters. His overarching concern is to vindicate God’s dealing with His chosen people, who had such great promises but let them slip from their hands through unbelief. Yet, God is still a just God, righteous in all His ways, and is proven to be just even in His treatment of His beloved Israel.

# Questions

1. Why does Paul qualify his comments, saying “I’m telling the truth. . .” (v. 1)?
2. What privileges did Israel have that were shared by no other people?
3. What is the significance of pointing out that Christ came from Israel?



## An occasion for grief

Christianity is supposed to be full of joy and happiness, isn't it? How is that Paul can say he has great sorrow and *continual* grief in his heart? Reconcile Paul's statement here with his admonitions to "rejoice" found in other places (cf. Phil. 3:1; 4:4, etc.).

Read Exodus 32:31–32. What similarities do you find between Moses and Paul?

Consider how deeply Paul must have grieved for his fellow Jews to cause him to make the remarkable statement that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ if it would save Israel. Then ask yourself how much you grieve over those who are lost, even of your own family.

## Romans 9:6–13

Paul asks a rhetorical question: if God's own chosen people have not accepted Christ, does this mean "God's word has taken no effect?" No, Paul says, because the concept of an Israel of God transcends the flesh: "or they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (v. 6; cf. 2:28–29). True Israel consists of the "children of promise" (cf. Gen. 12:3) who were to come from "all nations". "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (4:16). Therefore, it is **not** just the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise (v. 8). This part of the promise, realized immediately in Isaac and ultimately in Christ, was to all nations, including Gentiles.

From v. 9, Paul discusses the promise and its effect. He argues that God didn't choose Israel based upon good works (see Dt. 7:6–7). Instead, he says, God chose out Jacob (Israel) before he and Esau were even born and this was according to God's purpose. And it was all of grace; Israel did not earn the right to be God's people – He chose them.

God, in His divine foreknowledge and sovereignty knew that Esau would serve Jacob. Keep in mind that the quotations refer mainly to the nations which sprung from Jacob and Esau and not, primarily, to Jacob and Esau as individuals. Also notice the original locations of the quotations which Paul is using. V. 12 comes from Gen. 25:23 and was a statement made before the birth of Esau and Jacob. The quotation in v. 13 comes from Mal. 1:2, 3 and was made a great many years after the death of the men.

Calvinists use this passage to teach the doctrine of unconditional election. But Paul is not talking about God choosing Jacob and Esau for the purpose of *saving* them. He's talking about a national election: God chose Jacob over Edom in the sense that His chosen nation came from Jacob (Israel) not from Esau (from which the nation of Edom sprang). It is out of context to use this passage to show that God chooses certain ones to be saved and others to be lost. That is not Paul's purpose here.

# Questions

1. Find some Old Testament passages that seem to indicate that there is more to the term "Israel" than just the fleshly nation.
2. What other New Testament passages talk about a "new" Israel?
3. What is the significance of the statement in v. 7 that "in Isaac your seed shall be called" as an argument that they are not all Israel because they are the seed of Abraham? Who is Isaac, besides a child of Abraham?
4. Define "promise."
5. Go back and read the Genesis accounts about Jacob and Esau and recall how Jacob obtained the blessing. Is Paul talking about a blameless, honorable character here?
6. Is God in fact a respecter of persons if he loved Jacob and "hated" Esau? Does this statement contradict Acts 10:34–35?



## A God of Jews only?

People seem to take great pride in their family heritage. You can imagine how the Jews must have felt when told that the promises of God were no longer to be offered exclusively to them. Most of them rebelled at the idea and still maintain the stubborn attitude that God is the God of Israel only and will yet save them, even though they've rejected the only mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ (I Tim. 2:5).

What sin is at the root of this? Why would the Jews be so adamant about maintaining their fleshly distinction and how can we fall into the same error?

## Romans 9:14–29

Paul anticipates another possible question: is God unjust because He chose one nation (represented by Jacob) over other nations (represented by Esau)? (Again, it is important to remember that Paul is not discussing personal salvation.) Paul is establishing God's sovereignty, before proceeding to show why most of Israel has rejected Christ, and why the gospel has been embraced by the Gentiles.

The principle is stated thus: God is in control and has always been in control (v. 16). He shows "mercy to whomever He will" (v. 15) and others he "hardens" (v. 18). But God does nothing arbitrarily; there is purpose behind all that God does. Pharaoh is an apt illustration of the way God's purpose is carried out. He was "elect" (chosen) for a purpose – that "God's name might be declared in all the earth" (v. 17). Paul indicates that this is why Pharaoh was given power ("raised up").

But God does not "harden" a man's heart against that man's will. God took Pharaoh as he found him – an unbeliever opposed to God (see Ex. 5:2) – and used him to carry out His purpose. God has never hardened the heart of a believer nor has He ever saved an unbeliever, though He has often used them to carry out His designs (cf. Isa. 45:1, regarding His use of Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon and allowed the children of Israel to return to their homeland).

But someone may raise the argument that everyone is under God's immediate control and the way a man acts is merely an extension of God's sovereign purpose in that man (cf. v. 19). Paul answers this first by pointing out that the creature has no right to question the creator (v. 20). Besides, God does not make a man (or nation) good or bad, but some become "vessels for honor," some, "vessels for dishonor" (v. 21), depending upon their response to God's call (see chapter 10). "Vessels of honor" include both the remnant (faithful Jews) and "people who were not my people" (Gentiles) – in other words, all those "whom He called" (vv. 24-29; recall 8:28-30; II Thess. 2:14). Others have chosen not to call on God and God "endured them" in order to make the "riches of His glory known" to those who would obey (v. 22-23). But God desires that all men be saved (2 Pet. 3:9) and has never done anything (nor "elected" anyone) with the purpose of obstructing his salvation.

# Questions

1. What is Paul's answer to those who would ascribe injustice to God?
2. What is the source of God's mercy – His will or our works?
3. How was God glorified in the use of Pharaoh (see Josh. 2:8–11)?
4. Has God ever created anyone to be bad or good? How do you know?
5. Who, specifically, were the "vessels of wrath" (v. 22)?
6. Who were the "vessels of mercy" (v. 23)?
7. Who were those who "were not My people"?
8. How many of Israel will be saved?



## God is God. I'm not.

One of the main reasons people never come to God in faith is because they are too busy trying to figure God out. People have put themselves on the same level as God and have made it a practice to ask *"why have you made me like this"* (v. 20). Respect for God is at an all-time low, not unlike it was in the affluent Roman empire. We begin to think the world revolves around us. Sometimes, it is a national pride which turns to individual arrogance. But God is still the potter and we are still the clay, and in the final analysis, His purposes will be accomplished. Each of us should think soberly about the implications of such sovereignty.

## Romans 9:30–33

“What shall we say then?” With those familiar words (used only in Romans), Paul summarizes his first line of argument concerning the “Jewish problem”: that “Gentiles have attained to righteousness” (justification), by their faith, even though they were not “pursuing” God’s justification (v. 31). But the Jews have failed to “attain to righteousness” because they insisted on pursuing justification through the law (v. 32). The latter set aside faith in favor of attempting to merit salvation, and in that attempt they became self-righteous, ignoring the gospel which had the power to save them (see 1:16-17).

Paul says that in their pursuit of righteousness through works of the law, they “stumbled over the stumbling stone,” (v. 32) which is Jesus. Here is the crux of the problem. One cannot claim to be justified by law and faith in Christ at the same time. Before a person can successfully come to Christ and rely on Him, he must first realize his dire condition before God. The gospels paint the picture well – the Jews opposed Jesus at every turn, because they had established a righteousness (a means of justification) of their own and Jesus challenged that “righteousness” as something not from God but from the precepts of men (cf. Mt. 15:1-20). They never could come to say with Isaiah, “all our righteousness’ are as filthy rags” (64:6). Instead, they blasphemed God and His law by claiming they were “keepers of the law” while disbelieving in Him to which the law pointed (cf. Jn. 5:39-40; 7:19).

But Paul ends this section on a positive note, saying that all those “who believe on Christ will not be put to shame,” a quote from Isaiah 28:16. The original statement is interesting in comparison to Paul’s use of it, because it says “whoever believes will not act hastily.” The idea in the Isaiah passage is that those who believe shall enjoy the “poise” that come with faith in God when God comes to judge His people, which is what Isaiah is prophesying about. It has the same sense in Romans: those who are living by faith (see 1:17) will not be ashamed (they can “keep their poise”) when they stand before God at the judgment. In other words, “there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

# Questions

1. What is “righteousness”?
2. In what sense did Gentiles not “pursue righteousness”?
3. What was Israel pursuing and why did they fail?
4. In what way did Christ prove to be a stumbling stone to Israel?



## The fallacy of works–righteousness

The main mistake Israel made, of course, was that they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as Savior; He became to them a “stumbling stone.” But since they were ostensibly seeking a relationship with God, something had to replace Christ. If we reject the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ, then we must rely on our own righteousness to save us. One of the major religious extremes today, and a problem not uncommon among members of the body of Christ, is to seek to earn our salvation through works. Why can this be such a problem and what are some examples of it that we see at work today? How does a “works–righteousness” attitude betray Christ?

## Romans 10:1–13

Paul continues his heartfelt plea for Israel. His greatest dream is for Israel to come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved. Feelings, however, cannot hide the reality that Israel has failed, and failed miserably. While they have a “zeal for God,” it is “not according to knowledge” (v. 2). They sought to justify themselves by works of law (their “own righteousness”) instead of “submitting” (the verb, *hupetagesan*, is used in the passive sense, “to submit”) to the righteousness which God alone can give.

Paul said that Christ is “end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Some have taken this to mean that Christ ended law as a means of righteousness, or even that Christ abolished the law. Probably, neither is the idea Paul is expressing here. Instead, he is saying that Christ is the goal of the law. The Greek word *telos* can mean either “termination,” “fulfillment” or “goal.” Paul is probably saying that Christ was the end of the law in the sense that He brought it to completion, or brought it to its intended goal. It makes little sense to say that Christ terminated or fulfilled the law for everyone who believes since, to the extent Christ terminated or fulfilled the law, He did it for everyone. The point of this whole section is that salvation comes, not through law, but through Christ, who is the law’s intended goal and result (cf. Gal. 3:19-25; Mt. 5:17-20).

What law? Probably, law as a principle, though the Law of Moses would be included in the more general idea of “law.” Christ ended the principle of being saved by perfect performance of law. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (3:28).

Israel insisted on living and being judged by law but Moses said that one who makes the claim to do the law must live by it – all of it. Here’s the problem: if you are going to be justified by law, all of the law must be kept (see Gal. 2:10). Living by *faith*, on the other hand, involves a completely different disposition. The faithful are those who know that the work has been accomplished. Jesus has descended from heaven and has been risen (ascended). As Moses said in Deuteronomy 30, there is nothing too difficult or hard to bear. God has done the hard part, all that’s left is for us to believe and confess (v. 9, 10) and call on the name of the Lord (v. 13). Those who do so, whether Jew or Gentile (v. 12), “will not be put to shame” (v. 11).

# Questions

1. What happened to Israel because they had zeal without knowledge? What examples of such zeal do we see today?
2. Some (especially premillennialists) teach that Israel will eventually be saved. Does Paul's prayer for Israel make sense, if that doctrine is true (cf. 9:1–3)?
3. What was Israel seeking to establish (v. 3)?
4. Is the total plan of salvation presented in these verses? Why or why not?



## Zeal is good, if . . .

Zeal without knowledge. What a commentary on false religion today! Many of those religions are the same ones who misapply the rest of this chapter, teaching some form of the doctrine of faith only. What you end up with is “easy-believism” and cheap grace.

Is it possible for someone who is ignorant of the righteousness of God to be saved or to tell others how to be saved?

What is v. 10's opposite number? That is, how does one believe, but not from the heart (compare the same phrase at 6:17)?

Think of some modern-day examples of “zeal without knowledge.”

## Romans 10:14–21

Only those who believe will call on the name of the Lord, which involves implicit trust and complete submission to God, and only those who “call on Him” will be saved. But if one does not hear the proclamation, he cannot have the kind of faith that saves, because “faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of God” (v. 17). So, God sent many preachers over the years to herald the “glad tidings” (v. 15; cf. Heb. 1:1). He sent prophets, apostles, evangelists, teachers and preachers to tell the story.

Yet, just as Isaiah had prophesied (v. 16; cf. Isa. 53:1), not everyone has “obeyed the gospel” (notice, he doesn’t say “believed”; some would argue that there is nothing to be “obeyed” in the gospel, that it is based on “faith alone,” a concept foreign to the scriptures).

Paul foresees some objections: Can Israel claim she has not heard (v. 18)? No, Paul says, for the sound of the preachers “has gone out to all the earth” (quoting Psalm 19:4, the same Psalm that says that “the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament His handiwork”). Maybe they didn’t understand (“know”), maybe the message wasn’t clear enough – is that possible (v. 19)? No! If it was clear to Gentiles, then surely Israel, who had been prepared for centuries to receive the message, should understand (v. 20).

Paul sums up the problem in v. 21: Israel has proved to be a “disobedient and contrary people.” It is for that reason alone that they have been lost. God has made every provision for their salvation but they have turned their back on God’s righteousness and sought their own.

# Questions

1. What will be God's reply to those who say at judgment that they "never heard" the gospel?
2. Why were the Jews so angered and provoked (v. 19) by the Gentiles?
3. How did the Gentiles find God, even though they didn't seek Him (v. 20)?
4. Why is Paul using so much Old Testament Scripture in this section?



## Faith comes from. . .

Do you ever wonder how many people actually read God's word — *ever*. I suppose one of the most common statements at judgment will be "I didn't know. . ." Do you believe God will save someone who makes that argument? Isn't the word of God readily available to everyone?

But closer to home, how can our faith be strong if we do not read God's word? If faith comes from hearing God's word for the Jew, then it comes from hearing God's word for everyone. We cannot expect to have faith unless we are wholly devoted to the study of God's word. Ask yourself an important question: Is it the gospel to which you have responded? Or something else?

## Romans 11:1–10

Israel, for the most part, had rejected salvation through Christ. Does that mean everyone in Israel is summarily cast out? Paul points out that he is an Israelite (v. 1), proof that God's has not forgotten Israel. The gospel, after all, is to the "Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16).

There have always been a few faithful men and women in the nation of Israel (the *remnant*), sometimes feeling very alone. Elijah felt this way and yet God assured him that he had "7,000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal" (v. 3-4). At the time Paul wrote his letter, there were many faithful Christians who were Israelites, a "remnant according to God's gracious choice" (v. 5, NASB), who wondered about what God had in store for them. Paul emphasizes that this "election" was not based upon the "good works" of those who were chosen, but was based upon God's grace in providing a way for all people to be saved (v. 6).

But those in Israel who had stubbornly refused the gospel call, choosing to seek God's righteousness in other quarters, had not obtained what they were seeking (v. 7). They were "hardened." Sanday and Headlam point out that "they have not failed because they have been hardened but have been hardened because they failed." The word "hardened" comes from a medical term which refers to a hard substance growing where bones have been fractured, or of a stone in the bladder. It came to be applied metaphorically to the hardening of the heart (see Mk. 6:52; 2 Cor. 3:14). Sometimes, it refers to an action on the part of God, sometimes to something one does to himself. In any case, it is never unconditional and final. One who is hardened may repent and enjoy God's blessings in the end.

In vv. 8-10, Paul combines harsh statements from Dt. 29:4, Isaiah 29:10 and Psalm 69 to make the point that Israel's willful blindness was killing them spiritually. It is like a drunkard who kills a person and then claims he didn't know what he was doing. But he is responsible for getting into such a state of "stupor." "It is clear that Paul sees catastrophe as inevitable for unbelieving Jews as they continue to reject the gospel" (Morris, page 405).

# Questions

1. What arguments does Paul use to prove that God has not completely cast away Israel?
2. Paul says there is a “remnant according to the election of grace.” When did this remnant exist?
3. What point does Paul make regarding grace and works that he has made a number of times in the letter?
4. Who are the elect of v. 7? Are any Jews included?
5. Do vss. 8–9 prove that God prevented Israel from coming to a knowledge of the truth? If not, what is the meaning?



## Rejecting the mob mentality

Most of the Israelites rejected Jesus. That was the crowd's choice, the “conventional wisdom” of the day, and few chose to buck the tide. And so they were lost.

It is healthy to remember that the faithful have always been few and far between, that the road to life is a narrow one (Mt. 7:13–14). Most people have a mob mentality, and think there is some inherent virtue in big numbers. But, usually, a “religious crowd” is more of an indication of failure than success. The bible validates the point: where the truth is taught, there are few who can accept it. Paul says, however, that God always takes notice of those who are with Him. And he reminds us that there are others who are staying the course, just as there was in Elijah's day.

## Romans 11:11–24

While Israel did stumble, in that most of the nation rejected Christ, they did not “stumble to fall” (v. 11), which means that she has not been unconditionally rejected. Paul says that Israel’s “fall” has proven to be “riches for the world” (v. 12) in that Gentiles have been saved. The salvation of the Gentiles, in God’s providence, was designed to gain the attention of the Jews, to make them “jealous” (v. 11), hopefully for the same kind of salvation.

Paul argues that if Israel’s failure has brought good to some, much more good will come from their fulness (v. 12). The meaning of “fulness” is not easy to determine. It probably means the fulfillment of God’s will, which is for all men (including Jews) to be saved. If they would “come in,” it would be God’s will. Paul has proved that both Jews and Gentiles sinned (1:18–3:20) in the same way; now he shows that they can be saved in the same way as well.

Paul’s ministry was to the Gentiles and he hoped, by “magnifying” their acceptance of the gospel, to provoke some in Israel to accept it (vv. 13-14). Think of the impact when a Jew believes in Christ as his Savior! That is Paul’s point (v. 15).

Paul shows that Israel is still a holy (set apart) nation. Remember that Paul is writing before the destruction of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel was still very real. Also, he is speaking to Gentiles (v. 13) and desires that they have a proper respect for Israel. He says if the “root is holy so are the branches” (v. 16). That is, if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the “root”) are holy, then the branches (the rest of Israel) share in that holiness. “Some of the branches were broken off” (i.e., some individuals did not follow in the steps of faith which the “root” had established) and the Gentiles (the “wild olive tree”) were “grafted in among them.” The Gentiles, though never “God’s chosen people” were able to “partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree.”

But Paul warns the Gentiles “not to be arrogant against the branches,” (v. 18) remembering that they owe their salvation to the “root” which still supports them (cf. Jn. 4:22). The Gentiles stand on their faith and the Jews have fallen is because of unbelief. What happened to the “natural branches” can happen as well to the wild olive tree. The Jews are welcome back into the “olive tree” if they will only believe – the gospel is still open to them – vss. 22-23.

# Questions

1. What does Paul mean when he uses the term “fall” in 11:11?
2. Who is Paul speaking to? Is this important?
3. Why were the Gentiles saved? How could they be lost?
4. What verse in chapter 11 emphasizes the balanced nature of God?



## The disease of conceit

Paul is telling the Gentiles that they have been “grafted in” by God’s grace and are now able to partake of the salvation offered first to Israel. He warns them, however, not to be conceited about their position, but instead they ought to “fear.” Why?

Many teachers in the Calvinistic tradition try to make Paul say that salvation is unconditional for the “elect.” What does verse 22 say to you about that? Will God save you regardless of what you do with your life?

How might we, in Christ’s church, be guilty of being “conceited”?

## Romans 11:25–32

Verses 25–26 are notoriously difficult to interpret. Many have built a doctrine of the final salvation of physical Israel on these verses, but the position makes little sense when considered in light of Paul's argument in the rest of Romans. Paul's point is clear: both Jews and Gentiles, if they are to be saved, will be justified by an obedient faith (6:17; 10:16).

The interpretation of this passage turns largely on how we interpret "Israel." Most commentators think it means physical Israel, since Paul is discussing Gentiles and Jews in this chapter and even refers to himself as an "Israelite" (11:1). However, at the beginning of this section, Paul said that, "they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (9:6). And in other letters, Paul denies that there is any spiritual distinction between Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 3:28), arguing that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between them (Eph. 2:14). It seems quite inconsistent for Paul to say now that someday all (physical) Israel will be saved.

While there are great difficulties in this passage, we should not do violence to other Bible teaching in order to force a view on this one. This section must be teaching the same doctrine as the rest of Romans and the rest of Scripture: that whoever is saved is saved by the grace of God, and only those who exhibit saving faith will be justified, whether Jew or Greek. In that sense, all "Israel" will be saved, "Israel" referring to the true children of God under the new covenant (cf. Rom. 2:28–29; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 8:8–13).

What does this have to do with Paul's argument? Just this, that Jews are to view themselves, not as a separate privileged class apart from "Gentiles," nor as those who have been unconditionally "cast away" (11:1), but as members of the community of Christ. Paul, after showing why the Jews had failed, is concerned to show that the promise made to Abraham, that "all nations would be blessed" applies to Israelites as well, because they too can participate in the blessings which will be shown to the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). That promise is as irrevocable as the calling of God (v. 29). "Irrevocable" does not mean unconditional but simply means that God will not take it back. The promise to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ and the calling of the gospel goes out unfettered to all people, Jew and Gentile alike (2 Thess. 2:14; cf. Col. 1:23; Isa. 55:11).

# Questions

1. What is a “mystery” (v. 25)?
2. Who is Paul talking to, when he refers to his readers as “brethren”?
3. Is there any way to determine exactly when the events Paul describes will take place?
4. Who is the “Deliverer” in v. 26 (quoting Isa. 59:20)? When did He do His work?
5. If we believed the Bible taught that Christ has yet to set up His kingdom and is going to do so on earth, when He returns, how might it color our view of this passage?
6. When did God take away sins (v. 27, quoting Isa. 27:9)?
7. Define the “gifts” and the “calling of God.” Has God ever gone back on a promise?
8. Does “irrevocable” imply “unconditional”?
9. Who is “all” in v. 32?



## Check your baggage!

This is a difficult section of scripture. Terms like “partial hardening,” “the fullness of the Gentiles” and “all Israel will be saved” challenge our thinking. It is a good place to check up on our Bible interpretation skills. There are a couple of principles which we must apply here, or be hopelessly confused. First, be careful not to read anything into the passage – check your “baggage” (presuppositions) before coming to this, or any other text.

Many scholars see physical Israel in this passage because they have *already decided* that Christ is going to restore the physical nation. Secondly, make certain that your interpretation is consistent with the rest of scripture. One of the first rules of Bible study is to let scripture explain scripture. When that rule is applied here, it is hard to see how Paul could be saying that “all Israel will be saved” and mean *physical* Israel. Use this passage to double check your Bible study habits.

## Romans 11:33–36

If we get too dogmatic in our view of the preceding passages, Paul's words here will certainly convict us. God's reasoning is too deep for us (cf. Isa. 55:8-9) and His ways are past finding out. Our concern must first be on our obedience to God, not trying to figure Him out. Those who want to do God's will are the ones who are most likely to ever understand it (cf. Jn. 7:17).

Note that Paul's doxology ("verbal praise to the glory of God") is prompted, not by what we know of God (as in Psalm 19:1, for example), but by what we do not know. Those who love God praise Him both for what they see that He has done (creation) and for what they find unfathomable about Him. Paul has been dealing with a problem and has, through inspiration, explained it as well as it can be explained in words. Still, the solution to the problem is ultimately in God's hands – praise be to God!

Again, Isaiah is quoted by Paul (v. 34), this time chapter 40, verse 13, a section which extols the "incomparable greatness of Yahweh" (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 7, Isaiah). It recalls chapter 9 of Romans, where Paul reminds his readers that they are clay in the potter's hand and have no right to ask God, "why have you formed me thus?" (9:20). God made the same argument to Job, speaking out of the whirlwind (chapters 38–41), and saying, "where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" Paul quotes Job 41:11, making the point that we have nothing to give God – He owns it all anyway (cf. Psa. 50:10–12; I Chron. 29:14). And what God gives us is truly a gift. No one can make a claim on God.

In v. 36, Paul praises God with a tri-prepositional expression. Moffat translates it thus: "all comes from Him, all lives by Him, all ends in Him." Morris says, "Paul is speaking of God as the Originator, the Sustainer and the Goal of all creation" (page 429). Paul ascribes to Him "all the glory forever" – supreme glory belongs to God, the Almighty. Amen!

# Questions

1. What does Paul mean when he uses the term “riches”?
2. What is the difference between “knowledge” and “wisdom”?
3. What things are “past finding out”? Has God failed to tell us anything we must know?
4. Read Dt. 29:29. How does it compare with Paul’s thoughts here?
5. How do we give glory to God?
6. What does “Amen” mean?



## So, how’s your faith?

Words like these challenge our human pride. We want all the answers and a succinct solution to every problem. But even the apostle knew that we cannot possibly know all the mind of God because His wisdom is far too deep for us (Psalm 139:6). This is really a very good test for us. Eventually, everything comes down to faith in God, faith here meaning implicit trust even in the absence of explicit knowledge. It’s like turning on a light switch even though we have no idea of how electrical currents work. Likewise, we don’t have to “know everything” before we believe it. If we do, then we will never really submit to God, because God has not chosen to reveal everything. *So, it all comes down to faith.* How’s your faith?