

# An Essay on the Background of Romans 9-11

## *What may have caused the Apostle Paul to devote so much space to the issues in Romans 9–11?*

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Some years ago I talked with an adherent of the World Unification Church (commonly called the *Unification Church*), founded by Sun Myung Moon. That group had young people out selling flowers, and one came by my residence saying that the funds they were collecting would help free young people from their addictions. Mr. Moon was to carry on what Jesus Christ came to do. Jesus accomplished certain things but left much undone, and Rev. Moon's calling from Jesus Himself was to finish that work. Eventually the young man in my home admitted to me that the Christian movement was a failure. I was not amused. Poor Sun Myung Moon died in 2012. Naturally his wife has taken over the task of saving the world. Can you imagine standing before the resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, at the Great White Throne telling Him that His work was a failure? (See Mark 13:5,6.)

The young man's evidence for the massive failure of Jesus could be summed up simply by looking at the world and the mess it is in. He wondered, "How's that for the wonderful accomplishment of Jesus?" Moon's newfound religion, manufactured in South Korea, viewed its leader (known as True Father, a stage Jesus never reached) as the hope of the world. He was not merely the continuation of Jesus' work, or even its replacement, but with him came the establishment of the true church with genuine results. With this cult leading the way, the world is coming to true peace. To this I say, "Oh yeah!" Look around you! How is your movement doing?"

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**Hugh promises to Abraham** The Apostle Paul faced a similar challenge. God had made huge promises to Abraham. He would be a great nation, and in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Whoever would harm Abraham's descendants would be cursed by God (Genesis 12:2,3). In number they would be like the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17). Those who looked around in Jesus' time on earth could not see all this being fulfilled. We are led by God's Word into great expectations. With all this, Israel had an greater hope. God would send the Son of David, the Messiah. The father of John the Baptist expressed it well. Speaking by the Holy Spirit, Zechariah said:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:68-75)

Many would say that Zechariah spoke high sounding words (those are God's words!), but that they do not describe how things were going for Israel at the time his words were spoken. The Jews were not a free people. The promised hegemony of Deuteronomy 28:13 was nowhere on the Jewish horizon. Instead they had the curse of 28:44.

**The times and the timing** The Lord Jesus was and is the promised Deliverer. During the entire time of Jesus on earth, and all the days of all the apostles, the Jewish people were under the heel of Rome, and Jesus did not lift a finger to bring down that oppressive empire. Yet during those days, what He did do was set free all those in Satan's kingdom the instant they

turned to Him. Christ built a multiplying church that would not worship Caesar, and thereby the Lord destroyed the Roman Empire. At His Second Coming we will see that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). In Paul’s day and in our own, many cannot see the advance of God’s inexorable agenda. In any time in history, to deny that God’s Word will be fulfilled is a matter of unbelief. When God does not fit our expectations (and should He?), we are greatly tempted to judge His Word, as if His Word could fail. Remember Paul’s words in Romans 9:6, “ ... It is not as though the word of God has failed ...”

Unbelief in Jesus as the promised Messiah was endemic in Israel. The leadership did not accept the One God had sent. That is very well established in the Gospels. It is then no mystery that the people, like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34), did not turn in mass to the Lord. For them a highly desirable Messiah would be someone who would set them free from Rome.

**Where are we in the big picture?** Scripture addresses misunderstanding *the times*. Not to know the time one is in is not to know what is going on. Not paying attention to what the Lord has revealed is to be left without a clue. The Lord scolded the crowds that they could forecast the weather but did not know how to interpret their moment in time (Luke 12:54-56), especially the time when He was there with them. Abraham rejoiced from a great distance to see the day of Christ on earth, but the clergy of Israel, though with Him face to face, did not (John 8:56). He performed many mighty works, and they knew that, yet they did not recognize Christ or understand the very Scriptures they were reading every Sabbath (Acts 13:27). The Lord also said of His followers, that they were slow of heart to believe the Scriptures, in spite of the Lord repeatedly telling them what was coming (Luke 24:25,26,44,45). His words made no sense to them. The coming of Christ was accompanied by great revelation and terrible confusion.

**Acts 13 & 14 Theology and history** Romans 9-11 gives us doctrine, the *theological* explanation of Israel as a community rejecting Christ. Here in Acts 13/14 we have the *historical* report of this rejection in a series of events. Among the Jewish people resistance to the gospel hardened. When Paul and Barnabas arrived on Cyprus, a Jewish false prophet opposed their message, but the Gentile ruler believed (13:12). The chapter ends with a sad report of Jewish intransigence, while a positive Gentile response to the gospel was happening at the same time, along with some Jews. In Acts 14 the hearers of the Christian missionaries were even more polarized, and the Jews who had followed him to his next location resorted to physical violence, stoning Paul and leaving him for dead (14:19). These chapters anticipate Romans 9-11. I urge careful reading of them. The ground was shifting. Likewise in Acts 28 we see that the Gentiles will listen more than the Jews, in spite of their tremendous advantage to judge the claims of Paul from their Scriptures. Because they possessed these, the Jews were given much more reason to believe (Romans 3:1,2), but most did not.

**The most blunt passage of all** Jewish resistance is found in spades in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. Paul rejoices in the salvation of the readers of his letter. They suffered opposition from their countrymen, but that was not a new thing, because Paul had often encountered the same from his people. He then states vividly how strenuous Jewish hostility was. It was not only that they declined faith in Christ, they tried to prevent others from even hearing the apostolic message. (These were harbingers of the ACLU.) In all the vicious opposition he faced, we must not forget Paul’s expressions of love in Romans 9-11 for his people who hated him. 1 Thessalonians certainly shows the hardness of heart that gripped them.

**A helpful generalization** Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 are a sweeping generalization, and in this case it is accurate. When Paul said in Romans 11:26, “and so all Israel will be saved”,

we have another sweeping statement. Generalizations when true can be very helpful. I think we should view 11:26 that way. God's wrath coming upon the Jews is just another way to speak of His severity in not sparing them because of their unbelief (Romans 11:20-22). When Paul refers to "the Jews" in 1 Thessalonians 2, he cannot be referring to every last Israelite but to the Jewish community. Likewise, in Romans 11:26 "all Israel" means *the community* but not every last Israelite.

**Unbelief and promise** The resistance to Christ is clear in the gospels. Very early in His ministry the Pharisees had in mind to kill Him (Mark 3:6). All four Gospels report that Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9,10 as a description of His generation. In Acts 28 Paul does likewise. Yet in this circumstance, what cannot be overlooked are the promises to Abraham. There was generation after generation of sin as Ezekiel 20 makes clear, but the ransomed of the Lord returning on the highway of holiness with joyful singing is also predicted (Isaiah 35:8-10). This prophecy must be fulfilled. If Jesus is the real Messiah, where is the response to Him in Israel? The Apostle John wrote well after the days of Paul, that the Lord Jesus came unto His own, and His own received Him not (John 1:11). Does Israel's unbelief annul God's promises?

**Unbelief not new** That objection above overlooks the long history of Israel. Unbelief was the standard response of God's unfaithful people, and faith in the Lord was the exception. Throughout the Old Testament we note that the heathen were loyal to their false gods, while Israel, the only people with the true and living God, was treacherous to theirs. This deeply engrained unbelief stretched over centuries and culminated in the supreme rejection, the crucifixion of Christ (Luke 11:46-52). Paul points out those who rejected false worship were a minority in Elijah's day (Romans 11:2-4). Most of Israel had forsaken the worship of the Lord for the Baals of their neighbors. In Acts 7 Stephen reviewed the history of Israel from Abraham to his day. Just before they stoned him he said,

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him (Acts 7:51-54).

**Unnecessary paragraph, #1** One of the people hearing Stephen's words was a young, persuasive, and dedicated Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (Acts 7:57). He was to become an aggressive proclaimer of the very message for which Stephen was murdered – a death with Saul's complete agreement. May we all die as well as Stephen, so those at whose hands we may perish are left in God's gracious hands to be saved. Saul fought to keep Israel in its exclusive tradition. He was to become the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13 & 1 Timothy 2:7) who taught the gospel of God's grace. This grace was shown not only in personal salvation but also in crossing boundaries to Gentiles.

**Before and after** Something had changed. Before Pentecost the synagogues were securely Jewish and unchallenged. Gentile proselytes were allowed in. They were sick of Gentile debauchery, and they saw in the Jews a people who eschewed idolatry and destructive sexual practices. These Gentiles yearned to know the God of Israel. The Jewish community was not threatened by them. But then, after Pentecost, the Christian missionaries came – all Jews at first. These Jews entered the synagogues as brothers. (Note the meeting in Acts 28:17-31.) They presented boldly the promises concerning Christ in the Jewish Scriptures, and they insisted that these were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Some Jews were convinced; many were offended. They were being divided (Matthew 10:32-39). The gospel about Jesus was wrecking the unity of the

community. And at the very same time, the message was being extended to Gentiles. Jews were being divided, and Gentiles welcomed by the Christians. A strong reaction ensued. The Gentile response to the gospel was more positive, and the number of Gentiles professing to believe in the God of Israel and His Christ was suddenly a new threat, or at least it was viewed that way. Outside Judea, churches were being formed mostly of Gentile converts. Soon they were the majority. Paul was adamant; they must be accepted as brothers and sisters. A great chill had come over Israel. It seemed if this continued, this Christian group with its inclusiveness, numbers, and foreign background would dilute the culture Jews prized. And if diluted, destroyed.

**A possible Jewish rebuttal** It would not take long to state the obvious. This movement with some Jewish roots was quite Gentile in its composition. If they could only focus on that, it provided some reason to reject Jesus as the Messiah. The critics could say, “Surely the Jews (of all people!) would know what is truly Jewish. The Christians say who the Messiah is. Don’t Jews understand their own Bibles?” Or more, “Oh come on, Paul, if this Jesus of yours is the Messiah of Israel and the promised Son of David, how come your own people do not accept Him? Surely if anyone would accept the real Messiah, it would be His own people.” It could be said a hundred ways. Their analysis could continue: This un-Jewish movement was an aberration, an embarrassment that some Jews got involved in it. (This is a conclusion similar to what is still said today. Reviewing the prophecies of the law, the prophets, and the writings to see if Jesus fits them is still unwelcome, very much so.) In John 5 Jesus said that the Scriptures, His works, and John the Baptist’s testimony all identified Him. The last Jewish prophet announced that Jesus, “the One Who was to come”, had arrived.

**Unnecessary paragraph, #2** I interject here a feature that I think does not receive the attentions it deserves. In our Lord’s days on earth, religious leaders from Jerusalem travelled north to Galilee to hear Him, or sent emissaries to check on John the Baptist (Mark 3; John 1). Jesus was on their radar. Any suggestion that He might be the Messiah raised the question whether He was a descendant of David. They most certainly checked this out, and at that time they could do so. They had access to the records. But they did not like what they found, and never raised the matter of His genealogy. The chief trump card to expose Jesus as an imposter Messiah was not available. He did descend from David, and that is exactly how the New Testament begins.

**Paul’s proposition** “*But it is not as though the word of God has failed...*” (Romans 9:6). This matter was clear to Paul, but we are still left to wonder *who* might think such a thing, as the Word of God failing.

- **Unbelieving Jews** would not bemoan Israel’s rejection of Christian claims and consider this somehow as proof that the word of God had failed. They would be more likely to say the very opposite, namely that God had delivered His people from this infection.
- Might **Jewish believers** wonder if the very limited response among their countrymen indicated that the promise of God was not playing out reliably? Frankly, I do not really have a clear sense of this, so I will pass on to where I think the problem really lay.
- What were the **Gentile believers** thinking, or at least some of them? This Paul does address forthrightly. God had shown Himself to Gentiles (10:20), but Israel remained a disobedient and contrary people (10:21). The Jew sure appears to be rejected by God for this, and at this juncture Paul raises that very issue, saying He has not rejected His

people. Why would Paul say this if no one even thought such a thing? Paul did not deny that God had hardened unbelieving Israel, imposing upon them a blindness so severe it was a spirit of stupor (11:7-9; 22). Israel's plight under God's judgment was so great one could easily conclude that He is through with them. It is evident that some Gentile believers thought so. That leads to the question Paul has been ready to spring and answer; "Did they stumble in order that they might fall?" (11:11). Or in modern English, "Did God trip them up, because He is finished with them? And then did He throw away the key?"

**Gentile pride** At one time, Jewish pride made them look down on Gentiles, and now it does appear we have a form of Gentile pride looking down on Jews. (Probably no sin has the clinging power that pride has. Probably no sin has the same degree of ugliness as well.) Paul directly addresses Gentile believers (11:13). He explains to Gentiles that his ministry of evangelizing Gentiles has an unexpected benefit among Jews: It can make them jealous for what they have given up – as spiritual benefits covenanted to Israel are being enjoyed by Gentiles instead of Jews. Paul is fervent and certain that this jealousy provoked by Gentile salvation will succeed in turning them (11:11,14). There is coming a full inclusion for Israel (11:12). This will be such a turnaround that it can be called "life from the dead". That kind of change is utterly supernatural, and only God can do it, and He will, which means that Israel's fall is not the final word concerning them. God's promise stands and will be fulfilled. The Word of God has not failed.

I think Paul decided to go at this issue so it would be laid to rest with finality. True, branches were broken off so that Gentiles are allowed in. No room for arrogance here though, because the Gentile branches do not support the root; it is the reverse (11:17,18). There is room for Gentile gratitude. Gentiles can say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." The reason for Israel's loss was unbelief, and that applies to more than Jews. It is a universal rule, so wise up. There is no room for arrogance. It can happen to you.

Then to finish the picture, God through His apostle reveals the big strategy. The truth is that Israel's hardening is partial and temporary. In fact, all Israel (i.e., the community) will be saved. Does anyone want to speak up now and say that God's promises to the patriarchs are obsolete? Israel is beloved for the sake of the fathers (11:28), and the promise given is not retracted, nor the calling of them revoked or ineffective (11:29). We should all bow in gratitude and amazement that He has included us, and will never let His promises fade. Because of our salvation Israel will be jealous and will repent. The Jews cannot end up on history's trash heap.

It is my opinion that no one was explicitly saying that the Word of God had failed (9:6). The situation for Gentiles reflecting on this did allow them to think "we are in and they are out". This was true in a limited sense. If the current situation was viewed as final, *such a view would necessarily mean* that promises made to the patriarchs were inoperative, or obsolete, or not functioning. That is the kind of thing that cannot be. God is incapable of making false promises, and He is not forgetful of very old ones. With infinite wisdom He brings about His glorious ends. It is a mystery that He has made Gentiles to be fellow heirs with Israel (Ephesians 3:6). Now we know that within this great grace to us there is yet another mystery: by means of our salvation, God will go and get this hardened and blinded people and save them. "...They are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (11:28).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)