

# ROMANS 9–11

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## **Romans 9:1–5. Paul Prays for God’s People**

Despite all he has suffered at the hands of some Jews, Paul testified that he highly regarded his Israelite kinsmen, to whom Christ came in the flesh (Romans 9:5). They were chosen by adoption, glory, covenants, the law, service and promises of God. Paul wished the very best for them: “For I myself prayed to be accursed by the Christ on behalf of my brothers and sisters, my biological relatives” (9:3; see also the Joseph Smith Translation: “For *once* I could *have wished* that myself were accursed from Christ”).

The verb *ēuchomēn* was frequently used to express “I was praying” but is rendered more abstractly in the King James Version and the Joseph Smith Translation as “I was wishing.” Regarding the words “to be accursed,” one scholar has written, “Here in Rom. 9:3 *anathema einai* clearly means ‘to forfeit final salvation,’ demonstrating that Paul is willing to do anything to help his Jewish brothers and sisters.”<sup>1</sup> We read in Exodus 32:32, “Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” Paul emphatically wrote that he wished he could be cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinsmen in the flesh, which now extended even to the Gentiles, the rest of the human family. Paul not only wished he could leave for the sake of his people but desired to actually be a vicarious offering to God for their redemption.<sup>2</sup> In saying this, Paul subtly emphasized the vicarious nature of Jesus Christ’s Atonement. However, only Jesus Christ as a God and a human was able to atone for humankind (Alma 34:9–10).

## **Romans 9:6–18. The Abrahamic Covenant’s Power**

Here Paul affirms that the blessings of Abraham can be available to all people, even to Gentiles, including Pharaoh (Romans 9:17). Abraham had more posterity than just Isaac and Jacob. God said, “I will have

mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (9:15). Thus, even if some have rejected God’s blessing, Paul assures his audience that “it is not possible that God the decree of the Father has made no difference. For all of those [literally] from Israel are not [the totality of] Israel” (9:6).

Paul testifies that the covenant made by God with Israel is very powerful. It has set Israel apart and had significant positive influence, but this does not negate the fact that obedience is necessary to truly become God’s faithful, covenant Israel. By including the definite article, Paul is emphasizing “*the* logos,” which may be translated as “*the* word” (King James Version), or more specifically, here, as “*the* decree,” meaning the covenantal promise associated with Abraham that will save all of the Father’s children upon the condition of their obedience. Paul’s message here seems to be: “I’m not saying that the promise of God has failed . . . , because not all the people of Israel are the chosen people of God.” Goodspeed, a highly regarded New Testament scholar, makes the difference clear by rendering this line, “For not everybody who has descended from Israel really belongs to Israel.”<sup>3</sup> See the New English Bible: “For not all descendants of Israel are truly Israel.” The New American Bible states, “Not all Israelites are true Israelites.”<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Mormon, we read a similar concept in 2 Nephi 30:2: “For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel.” The Lord has clarified that His Abrahamic covenant is conditioned upon the principle of loyalty, obedience, repentance and enduring to the end.

### **Romans 9:19–29. God’s Justice and Mercy**

Paul then anticipates and responds to a potential objection: “Then you will say to me, so why is God still blamed? For who resisted his plan?” (Romans 9:19). Beginning here, Paul now provides examples of why humankind should never blame God for trials. God grants moral agency to humankind in order to provide an opportunity for us to progress eternally. Individuals may decide to harden their own hearts or make good choices according to the plan of happiness. The core meaning of the noun *boulēmati* (rendered here as “plan” but in the King James Version as “will”) basically means “purpose” and is used to refer to one’s intention as stated in one’s last will and testament. It is perfectly tooled for expressing God’s ultimate intention. Thus, this verse asks the central question of this section: “Who can resist God’s plan for mankind.” “Resist” in this case can be mean “to fight back” or “to maintain a stand [against].”<sup>5</sup>

The wording here does not support the idea of the later innovation of predestination, although many commentators have construed this verse to mean that humankind does not truly have agency because of the alleged absolute sovereignty of God. However, God our spirit Father, is not responsible for our decisions in acting on poor choices. Many challenges arise in mortality in a fallen world as result of moral agency. Like Paul, Joseph Smith “reproved those that were disposed to find fault with the management

of the concerns of the Church, saying God had called him to lead the Church, and he would lead it right; those that undertake to interfere will be ashamed when their own folly is made manifest.”<sup>6</sup> Prophets are the means by which God offers guidance to us, His children, according to His plan.

### **Romans 9:30–33. Israel and the Gospel**

So how could the Gentiles attain a state of righteousness when they followed secular laws? And, more than that, why did Israel did not attain that state, when they had laws of righteousness? Why? Because they did not act in faithfulness but rather relied on Mosaic rites, and thus “they stumbled by the stone of stumbling” (Romans 9:32).

Here again we see that in Greek literature and in the context of discussing the working of God’s covenant, *pistis* usually means “faithfulness.” “Faith” (King James Version) in Romans usually has been used to set forth the two later doctrines: the rule of faith and passive mystical experiences that Saint Augustine devised that supposedly guarantee immediate salvation for the individual. Paul’s use of “works” refers to the customs of the law of Moses, not appropriate actions related to faithful Christian discipleship, so we have rendered them “Mosaic rites.” Some theologians in Christian history have mistakenly interpreted the notion of laws as general rules or commandments given by God that do not necessarily need to be followed for one to be immediately saved in mortality. Instead of choosing to worship the Lord, Jesus Christ, the unfaithful Israelites became offended by Him because they were more interested in the letter of Mosaic law.

We read about the theme of stumbling often in scripture. For example, Isaiah 8:13–15 says, “Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken.” In Matthew 21:43–45, because of their lack of faithfulness, Jesus prophesied: “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.” Because the Lord is the rock of our salvation, He is a firm foundation, not just a small stone that can be kicked aside. The rebellious who kick against this rock or who are not faithful to their promised Messiah will stumble and fall.

### **Romans 10:1–4. God the Father’s Righteousness**

Paul next testifies “to those that possess God’s zeal but who lack understanding,” who have not “submitted themselves to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:2–3). As a former persecutor of the Church, Paul

knew firsthand about the error of misguided zeal—he persecuted the Church because he believed that Jesus’s followers were undermining God’s call for Jews to be holy and separate from the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> But Israel’s ignorance allows hope for the future. Paul himself was shown mercy because he acted with zeal without knowledge (1 Timothy 1:13). God judges in response to knowledge and also according to the desires of one’s heart (D&C 137:9). Zeal evokes the examples of Phinehas, Elijah, and Mattathias, who chose violence to defend the purity of Israel’s covenant.<sup>8</sup> Many who wanted to build up Zion in this dispensation had zeal but not understanding. Joseph Smith noted, “After having ascertained the very spot, and having the happiness of seeing quite a number of the families of my brethren comfortably situated upon the land, I took leave of them and journeyed back to Ohio, and used every influence and argument that lay in my power to get those who believed in the everlasting covenant, whose circumstances would admit, and whose families were willing to remove to the place which I had designated to be the land of Zion; and thus the sound of the gathering, and of the doctrine, went abroad into the world; and many, having a zeal not according to knowledge, and not understanding the pure principles of the doctrine of the Church, have, no doubt, in the heat of enthusiasm, taught and said many things which are derogatory to the genuine character and principles of the Church; and for these things we are heartily sorry, and would apologize, if apology would do any good.”<sup>9</sup>

In Nauvoo, Joseph also worried that the Relief Society “was growing too fast. It should grow up by degrees, should commence with a few individuals, thus have a select society of the virtuous, and those who would walk circumspectly; commended them for their zeal, but said sometimes their zeal was not according to knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is important for disciples to couple *pistis* with understanding, which naturally leads to trust and results in faithfulness without any misplaced zeal.

### **Romans 10:5–13. Bear Testimony of Christ’s Atonement**

“Because if you solemnly testify with your mouth about Lord Jesus, and if you understand with your heart that God the Father raised him from the dead, you will be delivered” (Romans 10:9). The cultural context for this verse seems to be either one’s legal testimony before magistrates or solemn testimony before church leaders prior to baptism (Luke 21:12–15; 1 Peter 3:13–16). Instead, this verse has been understood according to late Roman conformity to the Catholic Church or to the Protestant mental assent of faith (as is seen in the King James Version). But as is made clear in 1 Peter 3:21 and in early Christian texts, one made a confession before being baptized, and “we should more probably think of the initial confession made in Christian baptism—‘the pledge of a good conscience towards God.’”<sup>11</sup> Testifying in this way “calls upon the name of the Lord and demonstrates a covenantal commitment to the Lord ” (Romans 10:13). Many have debated what Paul means here because this first-century context has been set aside in favor of later theologies. However, first-century gentile Christians would most likely have understood Paul as telling them to testify before God the Father in preparation for making a covenant commitment

to the Lord Jesus Christ authoritatively through the ordinance of baptism—a baptism that symbolically delivered the faithful from sin and death.

### **Romans 10:14–21. Faithfulness Comes by Hearing and Obeying**

In these verses, Paul emphasizes the importance of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ so that people will know how to be loyal to their Lord and Master: “How should they call upon he whom they did not trust? How do they trust one about whom they had not heard? How do they hear except when one preaches?” (Romans 10:14). In verses 15–16, 18–20, and 21, Paul quotes a string of six phrases or verses from Isaiah 52:7; 53:1; 65:1, 2; Psalm 19:4; and Deuteronomy 32:21, teaching the importance of missionaries going forth to preach the gospel to all the world—even to people who had not asked, for God stretches forth His hands even to the disobedient.

In the ancient patron-client context, one would trust that the patron (or lord) inherently had authority, instead of his being merely someone in whom one could simply “believe” (King James Version). Furthermore, the Greek verb *pisteusan* in the first century meant “to understand and trust someone within a relationship.” In classical Greek, the verb *pisteusōsin* refers to knowledge and understanding that persuades and helps someone trust this knowledge and individuals. The King James Version’s mental-assent-oriented “believe” fits later doctrines of the rule of faith. *Pistis* is not the passive, inner, emotional feeling of belief associated with later doctrines of salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). The trust Paul is describing leads to action and to baptism as described in Romans 6, providing a covenant relationship with God the Father that is brokered by His Son Jesus Christ. Disciples can trust them within this special, covenant relationship, which begins with faith leading to faithfulness through ordinances like baptism.

### **Romans 11:1–10. Israel Is Obligated by God’s Obliging Gift**

Scholars have noted that thirty biblical citations and allusions may stand behind the first ten verses of this chapter, demonstrating that these actions were associated with the Mosaic law, not with conventional good morality defined as “works” in traditional Catholic and Protestant theology. Elegantly and insightfully, Paul drew on 1 Kings 19:18, then on Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 29:10, and Psalm 69:22–23, to name a few. Paul’s audience must have included many excellent scribes.

Paul explains that since God chose Israel as His people, He will not cast them away (Romans 11:1). Additionally, because God had preserved a remnant to serve Him, and “if that was understood as an obliging gift,” then that benefit cannot be thought of as having derived from Mosaic actions (11:5–6). Here, again, Paul describes the election (or choosing) of Israel as having been made by God and His people, each respectively offering and receiving the obliging gift known anciently as *charis* and conventionally rendered as “grace.” But, as seen earlier in Romans, Paul wrote that God “will render to every man according to his

deeds” (2:6). Among ancient people, the convention of gift giving (*charis*) was associated with reciprocal actions that could not be repaid but had expectations within relationships. Certainly, individuals cannot save themselves by their actions alone; however, Paul understands that proper Christlike actions are motivated by faithfulness within covenantal (*charis*) relationships.

Many traditional theologians cite this verse as another proof text to demonstrate that grace is a no-strings-attached pass to immediate salvation. This pass allegedly enables anyone to slide their way into salvation with no deeds of discipleship required. Nevertheless, in almost all times and places throughout the world, received gifts place obligations on the recipient, which in Jesus’s gospel are keeping commandments and covenants. C. E. B. Cranfield, a New Testament scholar who did not seem to understand the ancient convention that gifts obligated individuals to covenants to do good, has noted, “Standing by grace and standing on the basis of one’s own works—these (though not, of course, *charis* and *erga* as such!) are mutually exclusive.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, God’s gifts (real *charis*) are better understood as inviting humankind and, hopefully, inspiring disciples to become closer to Him and to keep His commandments, allowing future cycles of gift giving and reciprocity, thereby enabling humankind until we become like Him.

### **Romans 11:7. Being Blinded by Not Receiving God’s Choosing**

“So what? Israel has not obtained what it wanted, this it has not obtained but the chosen obtained it, while the rest became blinded” (Romans 11:7). The noun “the chosen” here is *eklogēn*, which usually means “the chosen or selected” in Greek literature.<sup>13</sup> It does not mean “the election” (as in the King James Version). The idea of election is overly Calvinistic and is not found in Greek literature but rather is only a reflection of Protestant theology.

The verb *pōroō* (rendered in the King James Version as “blind”) means “to render insensitive, or to make something hard.” In addition to seeing many allusions to Old Testament literature in this section, Paul’s audience would have probably made an instant connection to the blindness associated with the soul’s not being able to quickly know truth and ultimate reality as detailed in Plato’s famous “Allegory of the Cave” in Book 7 of *Republic*. Those who do not use agency in this allegory remain chained up in a dark cave and never get to see the brightest light. In modern English, blindness is also commonly used to refer to this moral or spiritual insensitivity.<sup>14</sup>

### **Romans 11:11–25. The Grafting in of the Gentiles**

Paul now speaks more directly to the Gentiles, assuring them that if the casting away of the unrighteous Israelites made Christ’s Atonement open to all the world, the receiving of the gospel by the Gentiles brings life to those who were dead (Romans 11:15). In explaining this mystery, Paul draws upon the traditional allegory of the olive tree. Paul summarizes and employs this allegory to make his point about how God

casts off the unfruitful and grafts in those branches that look more promising. He assumes that his audience knows this allegory. And well they should, for several passages in the Old Testament use the olive tree and olive horticulture as an extended parable of how God cares for His beloved and precious tree.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on a few of the complex factors involved in raising good olives in the Mediterranean world,<sup>16</sup> Paul makes use of four points in particular: the need to balance roots and branches (11:16), breaking off some and grafting in wild branches (11:17, 24), goodness of God as the husbandman (11:22), and grafting back in the natural branches (11:24). Thus, in instructing the Gentiles not to become overconfident of their new role in God's household, Paul reminds them that if the Jews "do not remain in a state of unfaithfulness, they will be grafted in, for God is able to again graft them in" (11:23).

Unfaithfulness, like faith (*pistis*), is defined relationally in the ancient world. Unfaithfulness was thought of as resulting in a severing of a relationship. In a gospel setting, covenants define faithfulness. In contrast, as much of Protestant Christianity moved away from ritual in the early modern period, the King James Version's translation "in unbelief" (which would be understood as condemning anyone who did not assent to creeds according to the rule of faith) reflects later Christian theological developments that were established and championed during the Apostasy by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. The use of "in a state of unfaithfulness" refers to the active nature of the reciprocation, to much more than believing in a static event. The restoration of ordinances and accompanying covenants reestablishes the nature of active faith in Christ through obedience to the laws and ordinances of His gospel.

### **Romans 11:26–36. God Has Mercy on All**

Paul then explains that God's covenant with all people is to take away their sins, especially the Jews' "for the fathers' sakes" (Romans 11:27–28). And thus "God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all" (11:32 King James Version), which may be rendered, "For God the Father positioned all for disobedience, so that he might be merciful to all."

Here is another case where most Christian theologians have read this verse in the context of original sin, which assumes that humankind is completely evil, totally depraved, and unbelieving because of Adam and Eve's alleged sin. But according to modern revelation, Heavenly Father's plan has given our spirits an opportunity to possess a physical, mortal body under the conditions of the Fall. In this fallen world, sin would occur because of the gift of moral agency, necessitating choice and mercy through Jesus Christ. This is what it means for God the Father to have "positioned all for disobedience." The King James Version's translation of *apeitheia* as "unbelief" is not found in the best Greek lexicons; this word only means "disobedience," which would characterize everyone at times, due to poor choices, during mortality.<sup>17</sup> In contrast "unbelief" is biased to reflect later Christian theologies of original sin and of faith as a mere feeling or mental assent.

Paul then ends this section in his grand epistle by drawing together elegant prophetic words into a gorgeous hymn:

O the depth of the richness, wisdom and knowledge of God!  
 How unsearchable are His judgments, and undiscoverable are His ways!  
 For who hath known the intelligence of the Lord?  
 Or who hath been His counsellor?  
 Whosoever hath first given to Him,  
 To him shall that be given back in abundance.  
 For from Him, because of Him, and unto Him are all things.  
 To Him be the glory forever. Amen.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

- 1 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1989–1990), 457.
- 2 Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *The Epistles of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931), 380.
- 3 Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London, UK: United Bible Societies, 1973), 180.
- 4 Newman and Nida, *Translator's Handbook*, 180.
- 5 Newman and Nida, *Translator's Handbook*, 187; Robertson, *Epistles of Paul*, 383.
- 6 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 225.
- 7 Galatians 1:14; John DelHousaye, *Romans: Translation with Study and Meditation*, (Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Seminary Press, 2017), 89–90, [https://academia.edu/30984940/Pauls\\_Letter\\_to\\_the\\_Romans\\_Translation\\_with\\_Study\\_and\\_Meditation](https://academia.edu/30984940/Pauls_Letter_to_the_Romans_Translation_with_Study_and_Meditation).
- 8 Numbers 25:10–13; 1 Kings 19:10; 1 Maccabees 2:26–27; DelHousaye, *Romans*, 89–90.
- 9 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 80.
- 10 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 201.
- 11 1 Peter 3:21 NIV; F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 192.
- 12 Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans*, 548.
- 13 Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. “*eklogēn*.”
- 14 Bruce, *Romans*, 192, 201.
- 15 See, for example, Exodus 15:17; Deuteronomy 8:8; 28:40; Judges 9:8–9; 2 Samuel 7:10; Psalms 58:8; 128:3; Isaiah 17:9; 24:13–15; 60:20–21; Hosea 14:4–8; Jeremiah 11:14–17; Zechariah 4:3, 11–12. See also David

Rolph Seely and John W. Welch, “Zenos and the Texts of the Old Testament,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1994), 322–46; John A. Tvedtnes, “Borrowings from the Parable of Zenos,” in *Allegory of the Olive Tree*, 373–426.

16 See, generally, Ricks and Welch, *Allegory of the Olive Tree*, esp. chaps. 9, 12, 15, 19, 20, and 21.

17 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “Apeitheia.”

18 Romans 11:33–36. Compare Isaiah 40:13; 45:15; 55:8; Job 15:8; 41:11 LXX; Jeremiah 23:18.

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