

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

BOOKLET Thirty-One

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

VERSE BY VERSE

(PART 3)

Romans 9 – 11

This is the third in a series of four booklets that provide notes for those who have heard our radio programs, which teach the letter of Paul to the Romans, verse-by-verse. If you desire to study this masterpiece of all the inspired letters of Paul, or teach this particular study of Romans to others, for continuity you should have the first two booklets in this series before you read, study, or teach from this booklet. If you will contact us we will send you the booklets you do not have.

Chapter One

“Election and Grace”

(9:1- 33)

In the first four chapters of this inspired letter, Paul related his message of justification by faith to the sinner. In the next four chapters he related justification to sinners who have been justified by faith, showing them how to live right and glorify the God Who has declared them righteous because they believe in what Jesus Christ has done for them.

Paul concluded that second group of four chapters - which is my favorite part of this inspired letter - with the most sublime and magnificent passage in the New Testament. Paul is absolutely convinced that we can be super conquerors because God initiates and

empowers the entire process through which we are given declared worth by faith, and empowered by faith and grace live out that glorious reality in our lives.

According to Paul, God foreknows, predestines, calls, justifies and glorifies those He chooses for salvation. The key to our spiritual conquest is not found in us, but in our heavenly Father Who justifies us (8:33), in His Son, the risen Christ Who lives in us, and in the Holy Spirit Who empowers us. The basis of the strong assurance of this apostle that we will be super conquerors is that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The victory does not depend on us but is won in us, with us and for us by God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit. (Romans 8)

“How Odd of God to Choose the Jews.”

The ninth chapter of Romans is one of the most difficult chapters in the entire Bible to understand and apply. Paul begins this chapter expressing his sincere and genuine love and burden for Israel. In his writings, he frequently expresses a mission objective: “To the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16; Acts 20:21) On his missionary journeys, as he enters city after city, his pattern is to go into the synagogue first and reason with the Rabbis that, “Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 13:13; 18:4, 5) In one of his most profound statements of mission strategy, he writes that his first priority is that he becomes as a Jew to the Jews, that by any means, he might see Jews come to faith and experience salvation (I Corinthians 9:19-22).

He writes that he could almost wish that he could trade his eternal salvation for the salvation of his beloved people. Many of us as believers, and especially those of us who are parents, have known the awful heart pain that comes from knowing that one of our children is moving away from faith and entering into a lifestyle that will turn their lives into a disaster. We may reach a degree of love for our lost loved ones where we would be willing to give our lives for their salvation. However, would any of us trade our eternal salvation for the salvation of lost people who are not our loved ones?

Paul does not actually say that he would, but that he almost would: “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could almost wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.” (Romans 9:1-5)

It is possible to tell someone and it is possible to tell hundreds, or thousands from a pulpit and even millions by radio that they are going to Hell if they do not trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. This can be done in a way that gives the impression that we are glad about this awesome possibility. Or we can convey this same

sober truth with tears and a broken heart. Obviously, this second choice will reach more people for Christ.

When Paul writes these words that express his burden for the Jewish people, especially those who are like Saul of Tarsus was before he met the risen, living Christ on the road to Damascus, he writes through his tears and with a broken heart.

He profiles eight ways in which the Jews were spiritually advantaged. The first of these spiritual advantages is what he calls “the adoption”. Remember in that Roman culture, a father would consider his sons to be children until they were fourteen. When they reached that legal age, he scheduled a formal court hearing and legally adopted them to be his sons and the legal heirs of his estate. Paul is using this word “adoption” in that cultural context again.

For reasons known only to God, from among all the peoples who existed in ancient history, God chose, or adopted the descendants of Abraham to be His chosen, special people. We do find it odd that God would choose the Jews and we cannot help but ask the question, “Why?”

Anytime we ask the question, “Why did God?” in the final analysis, the answer has to be, “God only knows!” We can reason that if God had chosen a particular race, color, or national origin of people, then that race, color, or nation would obviously believe in their national and racial supremacy. To come into this world as a God Man, God created a special people for that purpose. The entire Old Testament makes the statement that God chooses whom He uses.

However, the Old and New Testaments and ancient as well as contemporary Hebrew history make the statement that those who are chosen by God can still choose to not be chosen.

The second spiritual advantage of the Jews was that they were given the glory. This is a reference to the Shekinah, or the divine presence of God, which filled the Tent of Worship and the Temple of Solomon when they had been constructed and were dedicated. The cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night were manifestations of this glory, and guided them in their wilderness march as described in the Books of Exodus and Numbers.

Then Paul mentions the covenants God established with His chosen people. We should recall that the word “Testament” as in Old and New Testament, are actually the Old and the New Covenant. In addition to these two broad and general covenants, God made covenants with individuals like Noah, Abraham, and David.

The miracle of the Law of God that was given to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai is the next spiritual advantage cited by Paul. The love of devout Jews for the Law was referenced earlier in my commentary on the way the seventh chapter of Romans begins. We have seen that much of the systematic presentation of this great letter relates to a proper understanding of the purposes of that Law of God that was given to Israel. Paul is obviously grieved that the purposes for which that Law was given were never fulfilled in the lives of the Jews for whom he is burdened and to whom he is writing much of this letter.

A very important dimension of that Law and of the ministry of Moses was what Paul refers to as “the service of God.” This is a reference to the detailed specifications God gave in the Book of Exodus regarding “The Tent of Worship,” or “The Tabernacle in the Wilderness.” The important truth in all those specifications, and the instruction in Leviticus that shows how to use that worship tent, is God was showing this special chosen people how to approach and worship a Holy God.

Paul then makes reference to the promises. This is a very important concept in the relationship between God and Israel. Everything God does is predicted and preceded by a promise. There is the Promised Land and the promises God makes to Abraham regarding him and his progeny. Isaac is described as the child of promise. The challenge is to believe the promises of God. The father of these people is the walking definition of faith because he believed the promises of God.

It is only fitting that his next spiritual advantage is the fathers, or the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and others were called, empowered, and equipped by God to father, name, turn a large multitude of people into a nation, and then lead that nation. Paul considers these fathers to have been another one of the extraordinary spiritual advantages given to Israel by their God.

The eighth and by far the greatest spiritual advantage God gave to Israel was that it was through Israel the Savior was given through Whom the love of God was expressed for this world.

Salvation was made possible for Jew and Gentile through these chosen people. Through Israel God became flesh and lived in this world for thirty-three years. As he concludes his list of spiritual advantages given to Israel with the fact that the Messiah was given to and through them, he gives us one of the clearest verses in the Bible which proclaims something Jesus claimed repeatedly in the Gospel of John: that He was God: “... Christ came, Who is over all, the eternally blessed God.” (9:5)

Has God Failed?

“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’ That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: ‘At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.’” (9: 6-9)

According to Paul, being a Jew is more than an accident of birth. Those who are born of Jewish parents are not really the true Israel. Being Jewish is more than a nationality. Being a true descendant of Abraham is a calling. As I often observe, the word “flesh”, as it is frequently used in Scripture means, “Human nature unaided by God.” Paul is saying that those who are born in a way that does not require a supernatural work of God are not the true Israel. All those who are justified by faith and receive that

righteousness which is not earned by works, but given to those who believe in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, are the true seed of Abraham. He writes this same truth to the Galatians (Galatians 3:29).

The heart of this apostle is broken because greater spiritual advantage means greater spiritual responsibility. For all of its spiritual advantages, Israel has chosen to not be chosen by God and has rejected their Messiah and Savior. As Paul begins these three extraordinary chapters in which he teaches election - or the fact that God chose the Jews - he clearly teaches that their being chosen by God did not neutralize, or remove their ability and their responsibility to choose God and His provision for their salvation.

In these three profound chapters (9-11), Paul will use Israel as the supreme example in the Bible of the fact that God chooses, or elects those who are predestined, called, justified and glorified through salvation. In one of the greatest paradoxes of the Scriptures, he will also use Israel as the greatest example in the Bible of what we refer to as “the free will of man,” or the undeniable reality that we are creatures of choice.

A paradox is two truths that appear to be contradictory, but will not be when our thoughts and ways are in alignment with the thoughts and ways of our God. The fact that Israel is the biblical example of both free will and election is the ultimate paradox of the Bible. This same paradox is found in the Gospels where we read that the apostles clearly make choices to believe in and follow Jesus.

However, after three years of following Him, in His last retreat with them in the upper room, He declares to them: “You did not choose Me. I have chosen you ...” (John 15:16)

When we realize that, according to the Bible, God chooses us for salvation and yet we choose to be saved, with our flawed logic and finite minds, we think that it must be either/or. We either choose God and salvation, or God chooses us. The Scripture teaches that it is both/and. Although we cannot understand this, God chooses us and yet we still exercise our freedom of choice and choose God and salvation. We must accept the undeniable reality that somehow both these propositions, which seem to be opposite and contradictory, are true, because the Bible clearly teaches they are both true.

With that perspective, we are now ready to consider this very difficult passage of Scripture: “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, ‘The older shall serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.’” (10-13)

Based on what Paul writes in this chapter, God does not act as we think He should. He forces us out of our boxes, or the normal ways we think about Him. We like to think of God as if He were a man and that He should do as we would do if we were God. Through the prophet Isaiah God warned us that there is as much difference

between the way God thinks, acts, and is, and the way we think, act and are as we live out our lives, as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:8).

There was a time when everyone agreed that the earth was flat. Believers found Scriptures that confirmed what we now know to be untrue. Then those who study these things began to share the conviction that the earth was round, was rotating on its axis and moving in a vast expanse of space as part of a solar system, which is part of an immeasurable universe with more solar systems than we can number. That made some believers very uncomfortable at that time because they were absolutely convinced the Scriptures taught otherwise.

We like to have our view of this world in which we live, our philosophy of life and our concept of God all worked out in our minds, neatly tucked away in little imaginary boxes. However, the God we meet in the Bible, and the living Word Who wrote the Bible, does not always fit into our little boxes. He seems to delight in knocking the sides out of those boxes because He is far too big to be a God Who can be contained in a box.

As we are thinking of Him and getting to know Him, God forces us out of our limited thinking by being tremendously unpredictable, and by acting in ways that leave us baffled and confused. However, as Isaiah warned us, God is not a man (Isaiah 55:8). He does not think or act as we do. Before we get into this chapter, we simply must remember this perspective we receive from

Isaiah and not expect to understand God, why He does what He does, or the way He does what He has decided to do.

We will need to remember this perspective God shared about Himself through Isaiah as we read and study the ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters of this theological masterpiece of Paul. In these three chapters, Paul will relate justification by faith to Israel. Paul will use Israel as an illustration of God choosing man and the free will of man to choose God.

Three Principles of Election and Grace

Paul is establishing three principles of grace we must grasp as we move into and through this ninth chapter. The first principle is that salvation is not inherited. Imagine that we were born to parents who are devout believers. They have taught us the Scriptures, taken us to a wonderful church and perhaps even educated us in Christian schools, from kindergarten through college. We are spiritually advantaged. We are responsible and accountable for our spiritual heritage and all the spiritual advantages we have inherited. But, that does not mean we are saved. God has no grandchildren. He only has children. Paul's first spiritual principle of election and grace is that salvation is not inherited.

A second principle Paul establishes in this chapter is that salvation is not only based on choices we make to commit our lives to God, but choices God makes when He chooses us for salvation. We fight this second principle because we want to believe that we are

in control. If this principle is true, then the control is in the hands of God – and we do not like that loss of control.

A third spiritual principle Paul establishes here is that salvation is not based on whether we are good or bad, or on whether we have done good or bad works. Paul uses the historical allegory of Jacob and Esau. These two twins in the womb of Rebecca had done absolutely nothing good or bad. Yet we hear the declaration that God loves and has chosen Jacob, He hates Esau and Esau will therefore serve Jacob.

When we read that God hates Esau, we must realize that this is a figure of speech. Essentially this means that compared to God's demonstrated love for Jacob, His withholding of grace toward Esau was like being hated. Jesus uses this same figure of speech when He issues a call to commitment in which He says that those who become His disciples must "hate" father, mother, brothers, sisters and all the people in their lives (Luke 14:26). Yet scripture clearly teaches that we are to love our parents (Exodus 20:12) and that we are to love everyone (1 John 4:7-21). Jesus is teaching that our love for Him should be so great that by comparison, our feelings toward everyone else will seem like hatred. This was a common figure of speech in that culture.

One well known devout American Bible scholar and teacher was approached by a lady who said, "Dr. Ironside, I have a problem with this verse where Paul quotes God as saying, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.'" Dr. Ironside's response was, "I also have a

problem with that verse, but my problem is understanding how God could say 'Jacob I have loved!'"

When we read the story of the life of this scheming, manipulating, rascal Jacob, and realize how he lived up to the meaning of his name, which was essentially, "Grabber", we can understand why the Bible teacher responded the way he did. In the fifth chapter of this letter, Paul marveled that the love of God was expressed through Christ for our salvation when we were ungodly, sinners and the enemies of God. We all marvel that God would love Jacob, or any of us sinners He has loved and saved through Christ.

A second observation regarding this challenging passage is that we miss the thrust of the teaching here when we become totally focused on the concept conveyed by the word "election". I will address that concept next, but before I do, I challenge you to grasp the central and primary truth Paul is teaching in this difficult chapter. What he calls "election" is emphasized in this chapter because it illustrates the main thrust of what he is teaching in this theological masterpiece: that salvation is not earned by good works, but is bestowed as a gift by the grace of God.

Before these two twins had done anything, good or bad, Jacob was chosen for salvation because God loved him and not because he had done good works. This raises the question of God deliberately choosing Jacob. Does God actually choose an elect people for salvation? There is a sense in which the entire Old Testament emphatically tells us that is true because God chose the Jews.

We have two problems with that proposition. We like to believe we have control of our salvation and we do not think it is fair for God to choose some people and not choose others.

The thrust of what Paul is clearly teaching is that we must trust our salvation to grace, the sovereign choices of God and the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for our salvation, rather than our own choices and works. However, Paul also presents this paradox: even though we are chosen, we must choose to be chosen by trusting Christ to be our Savior and be justified by faith.

If you are familiar with the Law of Moses, you will understand why it was so very difficult for devout Pharisees to grasp and believe what Paul is teaching here. Zealous Pharisees, like Saul of Tarsus was before his conversion, memorized the first five books of the Bible. Many believers today have not even read those first five books of the Bible, which are the foundation and cornerstone of the Word of God. Devout Jews were therefore very familiar with these Law books. Two of them end with very strong exhortations to choose the difference between life and death, which was to choose to obey the laws of God and serve Him, or to choose to rebel and disobey God: (Leviticus 26, 27; Deuteronomy 28, 30).

It was therefore very difficult for devout Jews to grasp the teaching that spiritual life and death was not a matter of their choice, but God's choice. We can see why it was difficult for them to believe that salvation and declared righteousness is a calling and the

gift of God's grace to be received by faith, and not an inherited right and a consequence of obeying the laws of God.

We can also see why Paul, this Pharisee of the Pharisees, needed years in the desert of Arabia to learn these truths with the risen Christ, as he described that experience in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 1-2:10). He obviously needed time and supernatural revelation to grasp this truth himself and integrate this gift of righteousness and justification by faith into his theology as one of the most orthodox, zealous and scholarly Pharisee Rabbis who ever lived.

Rabbis like Paul taught by using the method of questions and answers. In fact, they even answered questions with another question. The Rabbi Hillel was asked, "Why do you Rabbis always ask questions and even answer a question with a question?" The famous Rabbi answered, "And why should we not answer a question with a question?" Like a good Rabbi, Paul then imagines those who read this letter asking him questions, which he then answers: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the

earth.’ Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.” (14-18)

Paul’s example of Moses and Pharaoh is even more difficult to understand and accept than his example of Jacob and Esau. Paul returns to his question and answer dialog by imagining his reader raising the objection that it is not fair for God to create a Pharaoh for the express purpose of opposing what He is doing in Egypt. It does not appear to be fair that He create a rebellious Pharaoh so He could demonstrate His awesome power in the ten awful plagues that fell upon the Egyptians.

Paul’s response to this question, and imaginary questioner is, “Who are you a man to question Almighty God?” He then uses a profound metaphor that was a favorite metaphor of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 18:1- 6).

The metaphor is that we as only mortal men are like clay, and God is a divine Sculptor. When a talented sculptor is forming vessels from a large mound of clay, does the clay speak to the sculptor and tell the artist how it wants to be formed? The obvious answer is that the sculptor is sovereign over the clay and can decide to make a beautiful vase from part of that clay and with another part of the same clay form a vessel that people used to relieve themselves before the days of indoor plumbing. He then applies that metaphor to God forming a Moses and a Pharaoh from the same lump of clay.

Here we find the same truth that is emphasized in the passage about Rebecca and those two twins in her womb: “So then it is not of

him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God Who shows mercy.” (9:16) The central and basic truth in these difficult election passages is not the sovereign choice of God. The thrust of these two passages is that salvation is not the consequence of the works, the will, or the running of man, but the will, the works, the providence, election and grace of God.

Jacob is one of the great biblical examples of grace. He begins his journey of faith thinking that all his blessings are a consequence of his cunning, manipulating ways of making everything come out his way. When he wrestled with an angel, God made him know that he was greatly blessed because of the grace of God, which he had not earned, deserved, or achieved by his own efforts.

God had been trying to bless Jacob with His grace for twenty years, but He could not get Jacob to stand still long enough to bless him. In one of the greatest allegories of grace in the Bible, God took this man Jacob (who was always running around manipulating everything and everybody until events turned out his way), to a place called, “Jabbok”, which in Hebrew means “running”. God crippled him there so he could not run anymore (Genesis 32:22-32).

Another way of stating the same truth would be to say that God had been trying to teach Jacob to do something which is frequently commanded in the Old Testament: “Wait on the Lord!” God exhorts man like Jacob to wait on the Lord and then watch God work. God wants us to be “Let it happen people.” Jacob was such a

“Make it happen person” he would not wait on the Lord. God therefore crippled him. After all, when a man is crippled, what else can he do but wait on the Lord. I call this “The Cripple Crown Blessing of Jacob.” When Paul writes in verse sixteen that election is not of him who runs, but of God, I believe he is making reference to this “Jabbok” experience of Jacob.

Paul’s reference to God making Moses and Pharaoh from the same mound of clay focuses a subtle biblical answer to that question Paul addressed and I mentioned in my commentary on the fifth chapter of this letter: “How did evil enter this world?” This question has plagued philosophers and theologians for as long as we have had theology and philosophy. There is a verse in the prophecy of Isaiah in which God tells us: “I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create calamity. I the Lord do all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7)

When a jeweler wants to display diamonds, he places them on a black velvet background so their beauty will be focused and enhanced. The Scriptures tell us evil is here by the permissive will of God. God does not create evil, but evil could not be here if God did not permit the existence of evil. In the Bible, God uses evil as a black background against which He exhibits the jewels of His love and redemption.

The name of God represents the essence of Who God is. God certainly is not evil. In this passage we are told that God uses Pharaoh and his opposition to the deliverance of the children of Israel

as a background against which God can exhibit His mighty power. God’s purpose in this is that His name might be declared in all the earth.

Paul began this passage in dialog with his questioning readers: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?” (9:14) The essence of his answer to that question is that God is absolutely sovereign and He does what He wills to do. Since God is omniscient, or all knowing, He in no way needs our advice or input. In the great doxology of praise with which he concludes these three chapters, Paul will quote Isaiah as he asks the questions: “For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?” (11:34) God will have compassion on whom He wills to have compassion and when He hardens the heart of those like Pharaoh, for reasons known only to Him, it is because He chooses to do so.

Paul then returns to this imaginary dialog with his readers: “You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (9:19-21)

Paul can well imagine his readers responding, “That is terribly unfair! How can God form Pharaoh for this purpose and then condemn him for doing what He created him to be and do?” The

essential answer this time is “How can we as creatures question our Creator God? Can clay question the sculptor who is forming it into a vessel? Since we are only clay in the hands of God, who are we to actually put ourselves in the role of God’s counselor?”

In the Book of Job there is a beautiful example of the truth Paul is presenting here by the way he answers this question with a question. Job was considered one of the wisest and most righteous men living in his time and culture. He had been in dialog with three of his friends, who were also considered the wise of men in that culture. When we reach the thirty-eighth chapter of that “Saga of Suffering”, God enters into their dialog and has a fascinating conversation with Job, which continues for several chapters in what may be the oldest book in the Bible.

God humbles Job by asking him a barrage of questions Job cannot answer. God asked Job questions about creation and essentially asked Job, “How do you know about creation, Job?”

Were you there? Were you there when I created the heavens and the earth?” He asked Job questions about stars in the solar system, the weather, lightning and many other issues Job did not understand and could not control. Paul is essentially doing the same thing here when he raises the question of how a finite, human, mortal being can possibly question God. Paul then asks the question: “Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (9:21)

People who live in cultures with democratic forms of government do not like the idea of a sovereign God Who has absolute power and control over His creation – especially their lives. Democracy is based on the conviction that no one human being should be trusted with absolute power over others. Democratic government shares power and responsibilities and holds its rulers accountable to the people they govern. No matter where we live our problem with this teaching may be that we resist the concept of an absolute and sovereign God because we do not even trust God with unaccountable control over our lives.

However, the concept of the Kingdom of God means that God is a King Who has absolute sovereign rule, authority and control over His subjects. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. There is nothing democratic about the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. God is the Good and Great Shepherd of Israel and Jesus is “that great Shepherd of the sheep”. (John 10:11, Hebrews 13:20, 21) One day Jesus will come again as King of kings and Lord of lords. Paul answers his imaginary questioner here by making the inspired declaration that God is the King above all kings and as the sovereign Lord of all lords, God does what He wills to do. (1 Timothy 6:15)

The apostle then introduces the real theme of these three chapters when he tells us about two kinds of vessels: “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory

on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?” (22-24)

These three chapters become one of the most significant passages of biblical prophecy in the Bible as Paul begins the theme, which he will continue through the end of the eleventh chapter. He will show from the Old Testament that it always was the plan of God to bring salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews. When God commissioned Abraham to be the father of this unique people, His promise to Abraham was that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3).

He quotes Hosea to show that saving Gentiles was not some kind of alternate plan God implemented when the Jews rejected their Messiah. “As He says also in Hosea: ‘I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved.’ And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” (25, 26)

He then quotes passages from Isaiah, which show that when the Gentiles become part of the Church, there will still be a remnant of Jews like himself who will be saved (27-29; Isaiah 10:22, 23). After quoting Isaiah, he ties this prophetic theme regarding Israel to the argument of the first four chapters of this letter when he writes: “What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness

of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone, as it is written: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.’” (30-33)

Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for this orthodox, scholarly, Rabbi, who was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews,” and “concerning the Law a Pharisee,” to grasp and internalize the truth represented in this passage? (Philippians 3:4-6)

Pharisees were organized to preserve the orthodoxy of the Jewish faith. All his adult life, this man had fanatically committed himself to preserving the orthodoxy of the belief that righteousness and salvation could be earned by keeping the Law of God. Then, through his supernatural encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and his time with Christ in the desert of Arabia, he discovers the Gospel of salvation, the righteousness that is of faith, the gift of God by the grace of God to those who will believe in Jesus Christ. That must have been like a theological and philosophical “earthquake” in the heart and mind of this Pharisee!

If you remember, that was the essence of what Paul wrote in the first four chapters of this masterpiece. He is declaring here in these verses the essence of what he also preached and wrote to the Corinthians: The issue is Jesus Christ and Him crucified which was and is the great stumbling stone of the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Nobody understood better than Paul why the Jews stumbled over this simple Gospel issue of righteousness as the free gift of God by the grace of God, being declared righteous by faith in Jesus Christ! That is why he had persecuted the Church of Jesus Christ so severely before he experienced his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus when the risen, living Christ arrested him and made him the great “Apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13).

Chapter Two

“What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

(10:1-13)

My title for this chapter is a question the jailor in a prison in the city of Philippi asked the Apostle Paul. Paul’s answer was, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your household.” (Acts 16:30, 31) We are now approaching the tenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, in which we will find the clearest answer we have in the New Testament to the question that jailor in Philippi asked Paul.

The word “saved”, when it is used by true followers of Christ is sometimes confusing and even offensive to unbelievers they meet on a daily basis. We use the word so frequently with other believers we do not always realize that unbelievers have no idea what we mean

when we use this word. The word “saved” literally means “to be delivered”. To appreciate this word, we should ask the question, “Delivered from what?” Unbelievers may ask us that very question if we ask them if they are saved. Their question may be, “Saved from what?”

Approximately two fifths of the time Jesus uses this word, He is speaking of being delivered from the future penalty of sin. In the New Testament, Jesus consistently and emphatically teaches that after death there are merely two possibilities: heaven or hell. However, three fifths of the time Jesus uses this word He is speaking of being delivered from some present penalty of sin. People are delivered from bondage, like a woman who was bent over and crippled by what we would call arthritis for eighteen years. Jesus described her as being bound by Satan all those years (Luke 13:11-16).

Peter prayed one of the shortest and most eloquent prayers in the Bible. When he was walking on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a stormy night, he took his eyes off the Lord and we read that, “Beginning to sink he prayed, ‘Lord save me!’” (Matthew 14:30) Immediately, Jesus saved him from drowning. In our journeys of faith we often have those crises that grow and develop our faith when we must pray that short but eloquent and critically important prayer.

In this chapter, when Paul tells us how to be saved he is primarily addressing that future and eternal dimension of our salvation. Whether it is offensive or not, disciples of Jesus who are

serious about implementing the Great Commission of Jesus must use this word “saved” because a fundamental fact of eternal life and death is that people are spiritually lost without God. We do not have to wait until we die to be lost. We are lost! That is why you and I must be saved! That is why the message of Jesus is described as Gospel, or Good News.

When people know they are lost, this is very Good News: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Paul begins this chapter expressing again his sincere and genuine burden for the salvation of the Jews: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (10:1-4)

Speaking out of a heart of love and compassion for the Jews, Paul sincerely commends them for their zeal in the way they tried to establish their own righteousness. He sees himself in their pursuit of self-righteousness because that was the driving force of his life before he met the risen Christ. He concludes this passage by writing that Christ is the end of the Law to everyone who believes. We should drop the word “the” and read that closing statement, “Christ is

the end of law to everyone who believes.” By this Paul means that the purpose of the Law of God was to be a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). He also means that Christ was and is the fulfillment of the Law (Romans 10:4; Matthew 5:17)

He is greatly burdened for these Jews because he knows the disappointment, frustration and failure of his own zealous pursuit of salvation by self-righteous achievement. For many years, he experienced the hopelessness and despair of trying to earn a righteousness, which Christ showed him is a gift of God to be received by faith in what our Savior has done for us.

Obviously, this is also a prescription that shows the Jews, to whom he is writing (and you and me), the difference between trying to earn our own righteousness and receiving from God as a free gift the righteousness, which is by faith in what Jesus Christ has done for us.

In the ninth chapter of this letter, Paul used Israel to illustrate the opposite of what he taught in the eighth chapter.

In the eighth chapter, and in the first part of the ninth chapter, Paul taught the miracle of the sovereign election of God. Paul assured the spiritual victory of those God foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified. In the ninth chapter, after teaching that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before they were born, he profiled the awesome reality that Israel exercised their freedom to be creatures of choice and chose not to be chosen by God.

Now, in the tenth chapter, he presents salvation to Jew, Gentile, or all who will call on the name of the Lord as if the miracle of experiencing salvation is simply a matter of whoever chooses to call on the name of the Lord. As I have observed, this is one of the great paradoxes of the Bible. The only way to resolve this paradox is to accept the hard reality that it is not either/or, but both/and. God chooses us, and yet we make the choices and take the critical steps that determine our eternal destiny.

Even though Paul believes in sovereign election, he prays fervently and continuously for the salvation of his brothers and sisters who are Jews and have not experienced the revolution in their passion for self-righteousness he experienced when he met Christ.

We should never allow the thought that because God is sovereign we cannot change anything by our prayers. In his inspired pastoral letters, Paul exhorts us that “God wants all men to be saved.” After making that declaration, he commands that prayers should therefore be fervently offered for all men. When our churches consider mission statements and objectives today, when the priorities are established, we should realize that these prayers that all might be saved are to be offered “first of all!”. (I Timothy 2:1-4)

Paul relates emphatically to these Jews who are trying to achieve salvation by personal self-righteousness because no Jew ever tried harder to achieve that kind of righteousness than Saul of Tarsus. He shared his futile struggle to achieve that kind of righteousness in the seventh chapter of this letter and in the third chapter of his letter

to his favorite church in Philippi. With great compassion, he therefore writes to and about these Jews: “For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them.’ But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (That is, to bring Christ down from above), or, “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?” (10:5, 6) The parentheses in this sentence are Paul’s parentheses.

Paul is quoting an intriguing passage written by Moses in Deuteronomy (30:12-14). This passage shows us that the great Lawgiver always did realize the purposes and the limits of the Law of God, which was given to the people of God through him on Mount Sinai. Moses knew the purpose of the Law was to show us we needed the Redeemer, the Christ, Who would come down from heaven, be the perfect Lamb of sacrifice, die and be raised from the dead that we might have the righteousness, which is of faith and by grace.

Moses saw the truth of the Gospel prophetically. When the angels announced the Good News that Christ was to be born and that this would bring great joy to all people, this was simply the culmination of what God began through Abraham and continued through Moses with the giving of the Law (Luke 2:10, 11). Moses saw that even though truth came to God’s people through him, grace

and truth would one day come to the people of God through a crucified and risen Christ.

He also saw the spiritual conquest Paul described in the eighth chapter of this letter. He realized that the righteousness, which would fulfill the Law of God, would not be simply a matter of keeping the Law, but a supernatural dynamic God would place in the hearts of His people.

Paul wrote that the righteousness, which is of faith, has something to say to us that is very important. He stirs our interest in what it says, by concluding the passage above with the question, “What does it say?” He now tells all lost people everywhere and for all time how to be saved when he answers that question. This is what the righteousness, which is of faith says to us: “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach ...” (10:8)

The righteousness that is of and by faith tells us the Word of God is in our heart and in our mouth. The mouth represents the outward man and the heart represents the inward man. Jesus taught that, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45) In other words, you can tell what is going on in the heart by what is expressed through the mouth. The heart is mentioned more than one thousand times in the Bible. When the heart is referenced in the Scriptures, we are being directed to the core of our beings where we love God, make decisions, form our motivations and set the priority values of our lives.

Therefore, Paul gives a clear prescription for how to be saved when he writes: “... If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.’ “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich toward all who call upon Him. For ‘Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.’” (8-13)

This is a more complete answer to that question the jailor in Philippi asked Paul. We have here the simplest and clearest prescription in the New Testament for how to be saved. This prescription instructs us to believe in our hearts and to confess with our mouths and then promises that we will be saved. Do we actually believe with our hearts? And are we confessing with our lives what we say we believe in our hearts?

If you study those more than one thousand references to the heart in the Bible, you will see that what the Bible calls the heart is sometimes referring to the spirit, will, mind, emotion, affection and many other dimensions of what makes us beings, created in the image and likeness of God. There is an expression in the New Testament, which encompasses all these areas of a human life. Paul writes: “Though our outward man is perishing our inward man is being renewed every day.” (II Corinthians 4:16) All those areas the

Bible is referencing when it speaks of our hearts could be called “the inward man”.

Many years ago, a man named John Quincy Adams was crossing a street. He was in such poor health it took him five minutes to approach the other side. A friend who was passing that way asked, “How is John Quincy Adams this morning?” He replied, “John Quincy Adams is doing just fine. The house he lives in is in sad disrepair. In fact, it is so dilapidated, John Quincy Adams may have to move out soon, but John Quincy Adams is doing just fine, thank you!”

John Quincy Adams had good theology. To make a clear distinction between the inward man (our spiritual man who is eternal), and the outward man (our body which is temporal), gives us an accurate insight into what Paul means when he prescribes that we must believe in our hearts if we want to be saved.

One of those biblical references to the heart exhorts us to, “Keep your heart with all diligence for out of your heart spring the issues of life.” (Proverbs 4:23) One of those issues is the issue of faith – the deliberate decision to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, because you believe in your heart that He died to pay the price for your salvation and has raised Jesus from the dead to be your risen, living Lord.

After giving the impression in the last part of the eighth chapter and throughout the entire ninth chapter that salvation depends entirely on the sovereign election of God, Paul now profiles

a strong focus on the responsibility we have for our salvation. We must believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths. Without these two inward and outward realities, he now gives the impression there will be no salvation. He concludes these verses by quoting the prophets Isaiah and Joel, who both preached that God saves whoever calls upon Him for salvation.

Be sure to make the observation that we are to confess that Jesus is Lord. The culture that was the soil in which the New Testament Church was planted was ruled by the mighty Roman Empire. Roman citizens like Paul, who wanted to be politically correct, or in favor with that great world empire, were expected to perform a ritual once every year. They were to throw a small amount of incense into an alter fire and solemnly proclaim, “Caesar is Lord!” Thousands of devout disciples of Jesus became martyrs because they would not perform that ritual. The battle cry of the early church became these three words: “Jesus is Lord!” (I Corinthians 12:3)

As you read the New Testament, also make this observation. We are not invited to confess Jesus as Savior. We are invited to confess Jesus as Lord. Paul’s answer to that jailor in Philippi was: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your household.” (Acts 16:30, 31) In the four Gospels, observe how Jesus pronounced that salvation had come to someone when they confessed that He was their Lord (Luke 19:8-10; John 8:11).

As you read the Gospel of John, consider the clear claims of Jesus that He was God in human flesh. The word “confess” in the

Greek language is actually two words: the word for “speaking” and the word for “sameness.” To confess literally means, “To say the same thing.” To confess Jesus is Lord is to say the same thing He said about Himself when He was here and to say the same thing God the Father said about His Son in His Word.

When Jesus gave the Great Commission, He told us how to confess with our mouths what we believe in our hearts - that God has raised Him from the dead. Jesus made it impossible for us to be a secret disciple of His when He made baptism part of His Great Commission. In that Commission He actually commanded His disciples to do four things. He commanded us to go, make disciples, teach those disciples and baptize all those who profess to be His disciples.

Paul wrote a concise and clear definition of the Gospel he had preached in Corinth when he closed his inspired letter to those who had been saved when he preached that Gospel to them in Corinth. Essentially, that Gospel was and is two facts about Jesus Christ: His death and His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

In the sixth chapter of this letter, Paul explained how our baptism professes our faith in the Gospel Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples to preach. I am convinced that baptism is the specific way Jesus prescribed for us to outwardly confess the inward reality that we are trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus for our salvation.

Throughout the twenty centuries of church history millions of

believers have died because Jesus made baptism part of His Great Commission. Surely Jesus knew baptism would cause the deaths of millions of His sheep – His followers. Since He shows such great love for the Church in so very many ways, we must assume that, as the Good Shepherd of the Church, He did not lightly command baptism for all who professed to be His disciples.

I am convinced that water baptism is the way Jesus prescribed for us to confess with our mouths what we believe in our hearts: that Jesus is Lord and that God raised His Son from the dead for our salvation and to be our risen, living Lord.

Chapter Three

“Partners with God”

(10: 14-21)

As I have observed, Paul concludes the thoughts he is presenting in the first thirteen verses of this tenth chapter by quoting the prophets Isaiah and Joel, who preached that God will be only too happy to save all those who call upon Him for salvation. He now writes that we can actually partner with the God Who is the source of, the power behind, and Who’s glory is the purpose for this great miracle of bringing salvation to others as he writes: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall

they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’” (14, 15)

After making it seem in chapters eight and nine that salvation is entirely the work of God, Paul now writes that salvation depends on the response of inward faith and outward confession. He is at the very heart of these three chapters where he is presenting the sovereign Providence of a God Who is the One Who foreknew, predestined, called, justified and glorified those He chose for salvation. Yet in this context he writes that unless someone preaches and the preachers are sent, there will be no salvation.

In the eighth chapter, his magnificent presentation of the sovereignty of God in salvation, and his teaching about election in the eighth, ninth and eleventh chapters has led some people to a misunderstanding. Some decide that we can leave our salvation and all the issues of our spiritual life entirely in the hands of God. Because God is the great source and power behind our salvation, He will bring us, and all those who are lost, to salvation without any help from us.

I once heard a story about a devout farmer who had worked very hard to turn a farm, which was overgrown with weeds and in very sad condition, into a productive and beautiful farm. Some of his fellow believers told their pastor they believed this farmer was guilty

of the sin of pride. The pastor called on the farmer and at the appropriate moment said to him, “You and the Lord have done a wonderful work here on this farm, have you not?” The farmer responded, “I am sure that is true pastor. I certainly never could have transformed this farm without the help of the Lord. But, pastor, you should have seen this farm when the Lord was running it all by Himself!”

One of our greatest blessings from the Lord comes into our lives when the Lord decides that He is not going to do His work all by Himself. In a garden Jesus once gave His apostles a great teaching. He was giving them six reasons why they must be fruitful. The key to His own fruitfulness was that He and the Father were one. He had a close and unbroken oneness with the Father all the time, and that relationship was the key to His fruitfulness. He was now challenging them to be at one with Him after His resurrection.

Jesus showed the apostles a vine with many fruitful branches. He then told these men that the key to their fruitfulness was to be at one with Him the way these fruitful branches were related to the vine from which they drew the life giving principle that made them fruitful. He made the great claim, “I am the Vine and you are the branches.” He also warned them that without Him they could do nothing.

Without Him we can do nothing. However, I am amazed when I realize that this metaphor is also making the statement that without us, He will do nothing. In this graphic and simple

metaphor, the fruit does not grow on the vine. In this setting, Jesus is a Vine looking for branches who will be united to Him as the Vine in such a way that they will be fruitful. The challenge for you and me is, “Will we be at one with Him and be one of those fruitful branches?”

If I had been the Lord, I would not have made the weak flesh of human beings a vital part of my work. But, He has included us in His miraculous work of bringing salvation to the lost people of this world. How that should fill us with grateful worship! God brings great meaning and value into our lives when He makes us His partners and does His work through us. Our Creator also brings great joy into our lives when He includes us in the miracle of bringing salvation to the lost people we encounter in this world. Joy does not fall out of the sky in lumps and somehow land on certain people rather than others. Joy, like peace has conditions and causes. Jesus told the apostles they must be fruitful so His joy might be in them and that their joy might be full (John 15:11). Our Lord found great delight in doing the will and the work of His Father (Hebrews 10:7). Paul wrote to the Galatians, that when we do the work God wants us to do, we find in our fruitful work a cause for great rejoicing (Galatians 6:4, 5). Being partners with God gives us the meaningful work that brings great meaning to our lives.

The passage above eloquently declares that lost people, who are to be the elect of God, predestined, called and chosen for salvation, cannot be saved until four responsibilities are assumed by

the church. The lost cannot call on the name of One in whom they do not believe. They cannot believe unless they hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They cannot hear without a preacher. Those who preach cannot preach unless they are sent to those who must hear and believe. He is challenging the church to realize why we are a church when he writes that they cannot preach unless they are sent (by the church).

In the eighth and ninth chapters it seems as if God has all the responsibility for bringing lost people to salvation. In this tenth chapter, we get the impression that lost people have all the responsibility to believe and confess that they may be saved. Then we have this great passage which emphatically presents the mission objective of the church and gives the clear impression that the Church has the responsibility to send preachers to proclaim the Gospel to lost people, or they will not hear, believe, call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

Paul quotes Isaiah to place a benediction on this responsibility of the Church to preach and send the preachers: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Isaiah 52:7) This is a beautiful metaphor, which is making the statement that God highly values those who are sent to proclaim the Gospel to those who must hear. We should also highly value the one who was sent to us that we might hear and believe the Good News of our salvation.

Two observations are necessary here. The word “preacher” hear can be confusing if it makes us think of a pastor or preacher speaking from a pulpit. It includes that, of course, but the word is intended in a much broader sense. The Greek word actually means, “to make an announcement”. We must not limit this person Paul describes as a preacher to a pastor, evangelist, or missionary of the church.

We are told that the first generation disciples of Jesus announced the Gospel to those in their families. They did the same in their friendships, to all those they met in their workplaces, and with the people who intersected their lives. In addition to those who were sent like Paul and gifted preachers and evangelists, this spread of the Gospel through what we call “laymen,” must also be included when he refers to these preachers.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that all who have experienced the miracle of being reconciled to God through Christ are immediately entrusted with a message and a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:13-6:2). When the reconciled believers of a church think God has only given the responsibility of announcing the Gospel to the pastor, evangelist, or missionary, the church becomes a “sleeping giant”. One of the truths that could wake that “sleeping giant” is that we are all commissioned to announce the Gospel to those who are lost. In this context, we need to realize that we are either a missionary or we are still a mission objective.

God places great value on those who bring the Gospel to lost people. Think of it this way. God had one Son and He was a missionary. Do you place great value on the person or persons who announced the Gospel to you so you could hear, believe, call on the name of the Lord and be saved? That person or those persons are the most important people you have met in your lifetime and you should honor them. There is a saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child. There is a sense in which it sometimes takes a whole church to announce and model the Gospel for lost people. The corporate witness of an entire church has often brought the reality of the Gospel into the lives of lost people.

My second observation regarding these verses about the beautiful feet of those who preach the Gospel raises this question: “Who is actually sending these preachers to announce the Gospel to the lost people in this world?” Although on the surface it appears that the church is sending out these preachers, the power behind this sending is the risen, living Christ. Jesus instructed His apostles to pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would send forth laborers into His harvest (Mark 9:38; Luke 10:2).

We should realize that no man can come to Christ, unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). People sometimes ask the question, “What if I am not chosen even though I want to be saved?” The answer to their question is that if they were not chosen and being drawn by the Spirit, they would not want to be saved.

We must also realize that when people like Paul and Barnabas are sent out by a local church, it is because the Spirit has led those in the church, and He has moved in the hearts of these sent ones to respond to the call to be set apart for that ministry (Acts 13:2). Paul writes to the church in Philippi that it is God Who is working in us to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Philippians 1:6; 2:13).

God has foreknowledge, predestines, calls, justifies and glorifies His elect people, yet they must believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths to be saved. God chooses and calls those who will announce the Gospel to these lost, but elect people, or there will be no salvation for them. However, those who are called to bring these glad tidings to lost people must respond to and obey that call of God on their lives and become partners with God - branches that bear fruit - for those people to be saved.

Again, we cannot help but ask the question, "Is God making the choices here, or are we choosing the great privilege of being workers with God in bringing salvation to the lost people of this world?" The answer does not work out in our logic very well but the answer must be that it is not either/or, but both/and. Our sovereign God and the living Christ make these choices, but we must respond and choose to be chosen. We choose to abide in Him as a branch in the Vine that He is and that makes us fruitful (John 15).

The Mystery of Belief and Unbelief

In many large cities, the simple act of moving a light switch and flooding a room with light involves a power source we cannot see. We cannot see the electricity or the kilometers and kilometers of wires and underground cables, which have brought that electricity over a great distance to our homes. We are unaware of the huge generators, transformers and in some cases magnificent large dams that draw energy from water to supply the electricity to our city, neighborhood, street and home where that light switch was turned on.

In the same way, in these chapters, Paul is profiling the work of the unseen Holy Spirit and the sovereign Providence of God, which also cannot be seen. We cannot see electricity at all, but we can see the effects of electricity when the room is flooded with light. We cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can see the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit every time a sinner hears, believes, confesses and is saved.

Jesus and Paul tell us that when the Good News is announced to lost people, some people believe and most of them do not believe. Why is it that we always find this divided response to the Gospel? Is it because those who believe are not as smart as those who do not believe? Or is it because those who believe are more intelligent than those who refuse to believe?

Paul's answer to that question is that intelligence is not the explanation for the way people respond to the Gospel. Jesus and Paul tell us that those who believe respond the way they do because

they are given the gift of faith (Matthew 13:11; 19:11; Philippians 1:29; 1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

According to Isaiah, this divided response of belief and unbelief when the Gospel is announced is not something that only happened in the New Testament period of Hebrew history. Isaiah prophetically profiled the coming of the Messiah, giving us more messianic prophecies than any other Old Testament prophet. More than seven hundred years before it happened, Isaiah gives us one of the greatest chapters in the Bible regarding the meaning of the death of the Christ on the cross (Isaiah 53).

The first six verses of that chapter are six of the most important and spiritually eloquent verses in the Bible on the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross: “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground; He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have

turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:1-6)

Paul challenges us to observe the way Isaiah began that inspired messianic prophecy: “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘LORD, who has believed our report?’ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (16, 17)

According to Paul, as Isaiah began his magnificent prophetic profile of the death of Christ, he focused our attention on this mystery of belief and unbelief by asking that question. According to Isaiah, the great defining issue that will separate the saved from the lost people of this world will be Jesus Christ. In so many words, Isaiah begins this great chapter by declaring, “I have the greatest prophecy to share with you that any prophet has ever proclaimed, but who is going to believe it?”

Paul follows this with a profound statement that shows how the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God as He draws people to faith and to Christ. The apostle writes that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. The verse literally states that faith comes from hearing the message of Christ.

Peter joins Paul in teaching this same truth. According to Peter, the Word of God is an incorruptible seed, or sperm that conceives spiritual life in those who respond properly to that Word when they hear or read it (1 Peter 1:22, 23).

Peter teaches this same truth a second time with another beautiful metaphor when he exhorts his readers to come to the Word as if it were a light in a very dark world. According to Peter, as they approach that light, they will experience two miracles: the day will dawn and the Morning Star will rise in their hearts (2 Peter 1:19).

This statement of Paul and these two metaphors that by Peter parallel this statement of Paul have formed a mission objective that has defined my philosophy of ministry since 1949. Isaiah told us in his prophecy that he preached the Word of God because God's Word brought the thoughts and ways of God and man into agreement (Isaiah 55:8-11). I have discovered that when we get people into the Word of God and the Word of God into people, faith comes and they are born again. That new birth is described beautifully in those two metaphors of Peter.

More Questions and Answers

Paul closes this tenth chapter by once again anticipating questions from his readers. When he focuses the critical importance of hearing the Word through which faith comes, the apostle can imagine his readers asking the question, "Well, what about those who have never heard?" Having shared the Gospel with many college students in secular university settings, I have heard students immediately raise this question when they have heard the Gospel for the first time: "What about all those who have never heard this Gospel?"

Paul raises and then answers this question: "But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: 'Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.' But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: 'I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation.'

"But Isaiah is very bold and says: 'I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me. But to Israel he says: 'All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'" (18-21; Psalm 19:1-4; Deuteronomy 32:21; Isaiah 65:1)

Paul quotes David, Moses and Isaiah as he answers this question. David teaches what the theologians call "natural revelation" when he writes that the heavens declare the glory of God, the space in which they exist declare the infinite size of God, and there is no place on earth that has not heard their declaration.

In my travels while visiting missionaries in some of the most remote places on earth, I have made a discovery. When those of us who live in large cities visit jungle locations where there are no city lights, we become more aware of the stars and of this awesome universe in which we live. As a shepherd boy, David probably spent many nights lying on his back looking up at the stars. The Holy Spirit inspired him to write in the Nineteenth Psalm that the heavens and space are preaching a sermon about the glory of God. There is not a night when they do not preach this sermon. According to

David, even though there is no voice or sound, there is no place on earth where that sermon is not heard.

In the first chapter of this letter, Paul declares that because of the message that is communicated through the miracle of creation, lost people are without excuse (1:20). Can lost people know enough through natural revelation to be justified by faith? The obvious answer to that question is “No”.

However, the teaching of Scripture is that if through creation the seeking lost person realizes there has to be a Creator, if they seek Him because they respond to the light they have received through creation, God will give them more light. This is a very important principle in Scripture (Philippians 3:16; John 9:40, 41; 15:22). Missionaries tell us that when they brought the Gospel to people in primitive and remote parts of this world, those people told them they had been waiting and expecting someone to come and tell them about the God they had been seeking for many years.

I had a personal experience that confirmed this truth for me. As a pastor teaching an evangelistic home Bible study, a Japanese woman with a radiance on her face asked if she could meet with me after the class. She told me that while she was in the bomb shelters in Tokyo during the closing months of World War Two, she prayed to the God I was presenting in that study. She had been a Buddhist, but she knew in her heart there was a true God Who would save her if she prayed to Him.

She placed her faith in Jesus Christ, the day dawned and the Morning Star lived in her heart. She became a radiant disciple of Jesus Christ! In that bomb shelter she had responded to the God Who had given her light - and He gave her more light and she left that night saying, “The Lord is my Light and my Salvation.” (Psalm 27:1)

Paul then quotes a profound verse from the Book of Deuteronomy where Moses gives a prophecy that becomes the theme of the rest of this chapter - and the entire eleventh chapter of this theological masterpiece. Moses predicts that God will provoke Israel to jealousy by choosing unspiritual Gentiles for salvation.

Jews referred to Gentiles as “dogs”, by which they meant that a Gentile had as much spiritual discernment as a dog. It certainly would provoke Jews to jealousy if God turned away from them and chose “dogs” to be His chosen people. Paul is continuing one of the of the most extraordinary prophecies in the Bible when he reinforces the prophecy of Moses that God will provoke the Jews to jealousy by saving Gentiles. Moses also prophesied that God will anger Israel by choosing a foolish people, or a people without understanding, for salvation.

Have you observed the extraordinary intelligence and giftedness of the Jews? Observe how many celebrated scientists, Nobel Prize winners, famous scholars and especially musicians and composers of great musical masterpieces are Jewish. How ironic that God would choose people far less gifted and intelligent than the Jews

to be His chosen people. Paul documents the fact that the Gentiles God has chosen are not chosen because they are noble, mighty, or intelligent (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

The prophecy of Moses is supplemented by two prophecies of Isaiah who adds to the prediction of Moses, that God will provoke the Jews to jealousy by choosing a people who are not seeking Him at all. Paul has already acknowledged that the Jews have a zeal for God, but their zeal is misguided because they are seeking God by looking in, and being obsessed with a zeal for their own self-righteousness. Jews who were like Saul of Tarsus, before he met Christ were intensely, even fanatically committed to that self-righteous way of seeking God.

For more than five decades I have been fascinated to hear the God stories, or the testimonies, of believers I have met as a pastor. There is a sense in which no two of these stories of how believers found God, or how God found them are exactly alike. One pattern I have observed in all these stories is what I call “the great intervention”. This intervention is beautifully presented in a metaphor by David when he tells us in his Shepherd Psalm how the Lord became his Shepherd. He writes: “He makes me to lie down.”

As I have listened to people tell me how they came to faith in God and Christ, I am amazed at how many of them were not seeking God at all. God was seeking them! He made them lie down by hitting them over their heads with His Shepherd staff, which often came in the form of a problem they could not solve. They later see

that problem as the loving intervention of their Shepherd God and they thank Him for that problem. He continues to affect these interventions at important junctures in their journeys of faith. Obviously, the initiative is coming from God and not from their seeking after God.

Someone has said, “Religion is man seeking after God, but the the Bible presents God seeking after man.” Paul, quoting Isaiah, predicts an extraordinary happening, which we see today in our own lives and in the faith journeys of others. Unlike the Jews, who had such a remarkable zeal for God, people, who are not seeking God at all are being found by God, Who is seeking them. Moses, Isaiah and Paul add to this extraordinary fact of spiritual life, the teaching that God will do this for Gentiles to provoke the Jews to a spiritual restoration.

Chapter Four

“The Mystery of Israel”

(11:1-36)

When a famous Bible scholar was scheduled to speak for a week in the church where I was the pastor, I asked him if there was anything he would like to do for relaxation during his visit with us. I was surprised when he asked if I could locate several books for him

by a well-known mystery writer, because his hobby was reading mysteries.

Millions of people like to read good mystery novels because “A mystery is a secret that is eventually revealed.” Those who like to read the great mystery writers enjoy trying to guess the mystery, or the secret that is eventually going to be revealed. In the Bible, the word “mystery” in addition to referring to a secret that will be revealed, is describing a future event that can only happen by the supernatural power of Almighty God.

In the eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to Israel as a mystery (25). The nation of Israel is a mystery for several reasons. The entire Old Testament presents the awesome reality that Israel illustrates what Paul labels as “election”. The Jews are the chosen people of God. As a great biblical paradox, Israel is also the primary biblical example of what we sometimes label as “free will” because they choose to not be the chosen people of God.

The modern nation of Israel is not the elect, chosen people of God. Their ruthless oppression of the Palestinian people demonstrates that awesome reality. The fact that they are a nation, and no longer in complete dispersion all over the world is a fulfillment of the preaching of Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, and these chapters written by Paul. But the spiritual return of Israel, which is also prophesied, has obviously not yet taken place.

Twice in this chapter Paul will essentially ask the question, “Has God thrown Israel away?” (1, 11) Has God rejected Israel because they rejected His Son and the Messiah He sent them? His answer is “Certainly not!” And “Not at all!” The dynamic message of this chapter is that God is not finished with Israel. In this masterpiece of all his writings, the great apostle refers to Israel as a mystery because the relationship between God and Israel is a secret that will eventually be revealed. When that mystery is revealed, what Paul prophesies in these chapters will only be possible by the power of Almighty God. Israel is a mystery in both dimensions of my definition of a mystery.

He begins this chapter with that question: “I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.” (1, 2)

When a powerful preacher who was a Jewish Christian finished his extraordinary message in a seminary chapel service, one of the senior students shook hands with him and said, “You are the first Jewish Christian I have personally heard of.” The speaker asked, “And have you never heard of the twelve apostles?” All twelve apostles were Jews and when we read the Book of Acts, until we get to the tenth chapter, all the believers in the church are Jews. Paul reminds us that he himself, as the greatest missionary in the history of the church, proves that God has not closed the door of salvation to Jews.

He then gives us an Old Testament illustration of a great prophet who thought God had abandoned the nation of Israel, and that he was the only prophet who had not worshipped the idol God of Baal and forsaken God: “Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, ‘LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life’? But what does the divine response say to him? ‘I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’” (11:2-4)

When we live and serve the Lord in a place where there are very few if any other believers, it is very easy for us to feel as Elijah did that we are all alone, and the only authentic believer left, who is faithfully serving the Lord. If we knew what God knows, we would realize that God has thousands, or even millions of faithful servants like us in this world.

Elijah made many mistakes, which eventually placed him under a tree praying a prayer of despair in which he asked God to take his life. His first mistake was that he forgot about the fact that we know only a tiny fraction of what can be known. Spiritual education is a process of passing from unconscious to conscious ignorance. Our situation is never as bad as it looks to us because there is so very much about our problems that we do not know. If we knew what God knows we would be greatly encouraged and would not have a death wish prayer on our hearts.

Elijah also made the mistake of underestimating the power of God. Things are never as bad as they look because God is not as weak as we think Him to be. The theme of the last part of the eighth chapter was that God is in charge, He knows what He is doing and He has all the power He needs to win our spiritual victory. He can make all the things that happen to us – even when there is nothing good about them – fit into a pattern for good that will fulfill His plan for and through us. When we recover our vision of the Almighty power of our sovereign God, we will not despair and ask God to kill us.

Elijah’s third mistake was that he forgot the difference between grace and works: “Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.” (5, 6)

When we think the work of God depends on who and what we are and what we can or cannot do, we will despair. Our victory will come when we recover the perspective that the work of God depends on Who and what God is, and on what He can do in and through us.

This great prophet Elijah also forgot that his spiritual life was woven together like a three-fold rope, or cable with his physical and mental life. He had been neglecting his physical needs. He was exhausted, had not eaten and had gone too long without sleep. God then put him into a deep sleep, woke him, fed him, put him to sleep

again and completely restored him to his miraculous ministry (1 Kings 17, 18, 19).

Paul applies what God told Elijah about a faithful remnant of Jews to the plan of God for Israel. Although there are not very many, in the two thousand years of church history and in our day, there have been and there are Jews who trust Jesus to be their Messiah, Savior and Lord. I have had the joy of leading a beautiful Jewish friend to faith in Christ. However, I have been in the ministry since 1953, and I have seen many people come to faith in Christ. However, I have seen less than ten Jewish people become followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul presents an explanation for this in the following verses where he writes that a mysterious blindness has been experienced by Israel as a people: “What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.’ And David says: ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always.’” (11:7-10)

The spiritual blindness of which Paul writes has been and still is obvious today. One symptom of that blindness is the direct opposite of the grace and mercy of God, which is consistently presented in the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation. The Orthodox Jew has been and is today determined to achieve salvation

by obeying the Law of God. There is something in human nature that refuses to trust salvation to God and confess that we are helpless to save ourselves.

Jesus was teaching the critical importance of this attitude of helplessness when He taught the very first attitude that moves us into the Kingdom of heaven and makes us the salt of the earth and the light of the world: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (Matthew 5:3) He followed that blessed attitude with: “Blessed are those who mourn.” At least an application of this second blessed attitude is that we mourn while we are learning to confess that we are poor in spirit.

Another dimension of the self-righteousness and spiritual blindness of the Jew was and is their conviction that because they are keeping the Law and doing right things, or good works, God owes them salvation. Paul will conclude the doctrinal section of his letter by pointing out that no man can say he has given to God to the point that God owes him something (11:35).

Mercy is the attribute of God, which withholds from us what we deserve. Paul made the case in the first four chapters of this letter that we deserve nothing but the wrath of God, which is set against our unrighteousness. Anything this side of the wrath of God and condemnation is the result of the mercy of God.

The grace of God is the attribute of God that lavishes on us the blessings of salvation we do not deserve. God does His part in our salvation as He uses every means possible to bring us to the place

where we pray the prayer of the publican, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13)

When we pray that sinner’s prayer, that is when we apply the first beatitude Jesus taught we must have if we are going to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world: to be poor in spirit. One translation of the word for “poor in spirit” is “broken in spirit”. In that context, God desires to use the adverse consequences of our ego and self-driven lives to bring us to the brokenness that confesses our helplessness and admits that we cannot possibly save ourselves.

The spiritual blindness of the Jew kept him in denial regarding his need of the mercy and grace of God and closed the door of salvation for him. There are millions of people in this world who are like the Jews in that they are determined to save themselves by what they do, or do not do, to earn their salvation. They are convinced they can and they are totally committed to earning God’s grace.

When Paul asks the question with which he begins this chapter a second time, he asks the question in a different way: “Again I ask, ‘Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?’ Not at all!” (Romans 11:11) As he answers this question a second time, he gets to the heart of the message of this chapter and of the two chapters that precede this one. In the second half of this eleventh verse, he will begin to give five reasons why Israel, as a nation will one day be a godly people again and choose to be the chosen people of God.

His first reason for believing in the spiritual restoration of Israel is that the salvation of Gentiles always was intended by God to result in the salvation of Israel: “But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.” (11)

If you are familiar with the Book of Acts, you know that when Paul entered a city he always went first to the Jews. When the Jews rejected his preaching, sometimes persecuted him severely and incited whole cities to riot and persecute Paul, he would then always turn to the Gentiles and preach his Gospel message to them. He lets us know in this chapter that his motivation for that strategy was to provoke the Jews to jealousy, as prophesied by Moses because he hoped that their jealousy of these devout Gentiles would result in their salvation.

Do you realize how these words should challenge all Gentiles who are justified by faith and are equipped by the grace of God to be living lives that glorify God? By the grace of God, we should have such a vital and beautiful relationship with God through Christ that we will cause devout Jews to look at us and be jealous! They should observe our love, joy and peace in Christ and say, “That was intended for us Jews and I am jealous of this Gentile who is experiencing what God intended for us as His chosen people.”

How many of us disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ have such a wonderful relationship with God that we provoke Jews, or anybody else to that kind of jealousy? Unfortunately there is really very little about the typical local church that would stir that kind of jealousy in

the hearts of devout Jews, or other unbelievers, that would give them the strong desire to have what we have so they can be like us. Actually, there is much in our churches that would provoke the opposite response. The essence of our witness to the Jews, or to all those who observe us is this: do they want to have what we have so they can be like us?

His second reason for believing in the spiritual restoration of the Jews is that the entire world will be blessed when that happens. In fact, that blessing will not come until that restoration takes place: “Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (12-15)

The ministry that sponsors our Bible studies is called “International Cooperating Ministries”. Our founder and chairman attended the International Congress for World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland many years ago. He was greatly impressed to see the flags of every free nation on earth that has been impacted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every nation on earth where the Gospel is freely proclaimed is a free nation. His vision for impacting all nations with the Word of God was born at that great Congress. Our

statement of faith is the doctrinal statement that was forged by those representatives of free nations who attended that Congress.

There is a sense in which all those nations have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ because the Jews rejected Christ. What Paul is writing here is, that if that rejection resulted in all those nations hearing the Gospel of Christ, how much more the whole world will be blessed when the Jews believe the Gospel and choose to become the chosen people of God. That is the extraordinary miracle Moses, Isaiah, David and the Apostle Paul proclaim together in this amazing chapter of the Bible.

To present his third reason for believing in a spiritual restoration of Israel Paul’s uses two profound metaphors: “For if the first fruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.” (16)

Only a devout Jew would understand these metaphors. That is one reason this letter is harder for us who are Gentiles to understand. Several times now, I have observed that as Paul writes this letter, he is addressing Jews who were like that zealous Saul of Tarsus before he met Christ and changed his name to Paul.

The first metaphor relates to the worship God commanded in the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, specifically the offering of the first fruit. To present this offering to the Lord, a large batch of dough was prepared. A priest would separate a small loaf of that dough from the large batch (which this translation refers to as the lump), and offer it to the Lord as the first fruit offering. The metaphor is teaching that if

the loaf that was separated from the batch was holy then the whole batch was also holy.

The application of the metaphor is that the first fruit represented the Patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were holy. If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were holy and they were the first fruit, or the fathers of these chosen people, then the people as a nation were holy too.

The second metaphor leads Paul into his fourth reason for believing in the spiritual restoration of Israel, which relates to roots and branches. When a Jew becomes a Christian, he does not change his spiritual heritage at all. He becomes a completed Jew. However, when a Gentile becomes a Christian, he becomes a spiritual Jew. The Jews are the root system that supports the wild olive branches (the Gentiles). The Gentiles are only grafted into the olive tree (the Jews). The Jews are the natural and original branches of this olive tree, which represents the original chosen people of God.

Paul is now addressing Gentiles as he writes: “And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you.

“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off,

and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.” (17-21)

Redeemed Gentiles are grafted on branches but the natural children of Abraham are the roots, which support those branches. Paul clearly believes that Moses, Isaiah and David predicted the spiritual restoration of Israel. It is inconceivable to Paul that the root system, which supports these wild olive branches that are grafted into this olive tree, will not one day be restored. This is his fourth reason for believing in that ultimate spiritual restoration.

The Bible is sometimes referred to as the “Hebrew-Christian Revelation of God”. When the Bible is designated as a Hebrew and then a Christian Revelation, this is another way of referring to the Old and the New Testaments.

It is important for us to realize that the first five books of the Old Testament, or the Law Books, are a very important foundation we need as we approach the Gospels and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. (If you have not studied these books of the Old Testament, I encourage you to obtain my Booklets 1 and 2 that will help you in your study.) In this profound letter of Paul, he teaches emphatically that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross was and is the basis on which our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous.

When we hear John the Baptist introduce Jesus as the Lamb of God, or when the apostles teach in their inspired letters what Paul clearly teaches in this letter, that we are justified by faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross, the strongest argument for that teaching

is found in the Law Books of Exodus and Leviticus. (John 1:29) This is where the blood of the Passover Lamb was offered as an atonement, or a covering, which protected the Hebrew families from the wrath of God. When the Angel of Jehovah saw the blood of the Lamb, He passed over those families. (Exodus 12)

One of the last statements of Jesus before He was arrested and crucified was made in an upper room where He celebrated His last Passover with the apostles. He began that Passover by telling these men He loved so much that He had looked forward to this particular Passover with them. This was because He would not celebrate this holy feast again until it was fulfilled (Luke 22:15, 16). Shortly after stating those words, Jesus became that Passover Lamb by dying on the cross.

Throughout this magnificent letter of Paul to the Romans, he has been presenting two concepts: “The Law,” and “The Fulfillment of the Law.” According to Paul, the Law of God through Moses is fulfilled through Jesus Christ on a cross.

When we say we believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, we can support that conviction with the words of Jesus quoted above relating His death on the cross to the Passover Lamb. We can also base our conviction on the inspired written words of the apostles. However, our strongest support for that conviction comes from the Law Books of Exodus and Leviticus where the sacrificial Passover Lamb is presented and applied to the worship of the Jews.

That is what is meant when the Bible is called the “Hebrew-Christian Revelation of God.” And that is what Paul means when he writes that these grafted on branches do not support the root system of Israel, but the root system of Israel supports these branches.

As Paul addresses Gentile Christians in these verses above, he is metaphorically presenting Abraham and the faith of Abraham as an olive tree, and Gentile believers as wild olive branches that have been grafted to that olive tree. The natural branches of that olive tree have been broken off through unbelief. However, as Paul addresses every generation of Gentiles since the first century, he warns Gentile believers, that if the natural branches were broken off by unbelief, if we Gentiles do not believe in the righteousness that is by faith, we will be broken off also.

The fifth reason Paul believes in the spiritual restoration of Israel is found in these verses: “Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (22-24)

To understand Paul’s first reason for this extraordinary conviction - that Israel will one day be spiritually restored – I made

the observation that we needed to understand the thinking of a devout Jew who was educated in the Old Testament worship offerings. To understand his final reason for believing in this prophetic teaching we need to know something about growing fruit trees.

Since one of my best friends is a professional in that area I have been able to learn from him that if you grafted a nectarine branch on a peach tree that branch would not grow peaches. It would grow nectarines rather than peaches because the fruit is determined by the branch and not by the tree when branches are grafted in that way.

That is why Paul uses the words “contrary to nature” in the passage quoted above. Through this beautiful metaphor Paul is essentially saying to these Gentiles: “You as Gentiles were cut away from a wild olive tree and as wild olive branches grafted to a cultivated, fruitful olive tree. You should only be capable of producing wild, shriveled, bitter, and worthless fruit. But, contrary to nature, you are producing the supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit! If God can produce the new creation you have become from wild olive branches like you, surely He can and will produce supernatural fruit from the natural branches, when they believe and have been grafted back into their beautiful olive tree as the natural children of Abraham.”

Now we are not considering a Hebrew-Christian Revelation, but two separate Hebrew and Christian peoples who have been having a strained relationship for more than twenty centuries. In

most cultures, relatives who have very little in common all year long must meet and relate to one another several times every year for special holiday celebrations. The co-existence of the church of Jesus Christ and the Jewish nation are like relatives who occasionally meet, but find it awkward and sometimes even impossible to work out their relationship to each other.

We should realize that this is more than a conviction, or prophecy of merely the Apostle Paul. Remember that he bases this hope for the Israel he loves so much on the prophecies of Moses, Isaiah and David. He could have referenced other prophets also, especially Zechariah (8:20-23; 13:6), who, except for Isaiah, gives us more Messianic prophecies than any other prophet.

This final reason for Paul’s belief in a spiritually restored Israel has a past, present and will have a future application. When Paul writes that God can graft back into that olive tree those Jews who believe, we should never forget that the first members of the Church of Jesus Christ were Jews.

In the Book of Acts, we read about three thousand who were converted on the Day of Pentecost. Then we read about the thousands who were converted in the days and weeks following that miraculous happening. As we continue reading, the inspired history of the New Testament Church replaces the word “thousands” with the word “multitudes.” The Church is then described as great multitudes of people. Remember that all those thousands and multitudes of believers were Jews!

Today we find it to be extraordinary when a Jewish person confesses Jesus to be their Messiah, Savior and Lord. As I have observed, it is unusual today for a Jew to become what we consider a Messianic Jew. It is difficult for them to trust Jesus Christ to be their Savior and Lord. This is a consequence of that blindness which is upon the Jews today. However, we must remember that it is not impossible. In the tenth chapter of the Book of Acts, the Lord had to give Peter a supernatural Revelation - and repeat that Revelation three times - before He could convince Peter that a Gentile could be justified by faith and be born again.

As we read the Book of Acts, all the believers we read about are Jews until we reach the tenth chapter of that history book of the Church. In the first generation of the Church, Jews and Gentiles were both devout disciples of Jesus Christ. They worked out their unity, or oneness in Christ. In some churches, like the Church at Antioch, they actually lived together and ate their meals together (Galatians 2:11-14). Since the Jews strictly observed the many dietary laws they learned from Moses, and the Gentile Christians did not, the first Church Council had to be called to resolve these differences (Acts 15:22-29).

The finding of that counsel was that when a Gentile became a disciple of Jesus, they were not required to live like a Jew because their Lord and Savior was a Jewish Messiah. This is interesting when we consider what Paul writes to the Galatians - that followers of Christ with authentic faith are spiritual Jews, or the true children

of Abraham, because they have faith like that of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

When a Jew became a disciple of Jesus, they were not required to abdicate their identity as Jews, or their Jewish practices such as their dietary laws. While Gentile believers are considered to be spiritual Jews, these Messianic Jews are considered completed Jews. This extraordinary chapter records a prophetic revelation God gave this apostle.

The passage we have now considered and the verses in this eleventh chapter we are now approaching make the nation of Israel a paradox and a biblical, theological, political and international curiosity. As we read this chapter with its overwhelming bias regarding the value of these natural olive tree branches, relative to the wild olive tree branches of non-Jewish disciples of the risen Christ, and this prophecy of their spiritual restoration, we find it a challenge to our faith.

My wife and I have a daughter who lived for five years on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in Palestine. Her experience working with World Vision Jerusalem, which was there to bring relief to the oppressed Palestinian people, gave her and us as her parents' insights into the some of the ways the Israeli military treats the Palestinian people. We must confess that we find it a faith challenge to see the modern nation of Israel through the heart, the burden and the prophetic revelation of Paul and these prophets. We can say with

certainty that all prophecy has not been fulfilled yet and we look forward to seeing the Spiritual return of the Jewish people.

Clearly, except for Messianic Jews, the Jews of today, according to Paul, are not the chosen people of God. They are the broken off branches (11:17, 21). However, by faith we can believe God will fulfill His Word regarding Israel - in His time and in His way.

The Greatest Irony in the Bible

In these verses we have now considered, Paul is writing that Israel is also one of the great ironies and paradoxes of the Bible. It is a fascinating biblical irony that the natural children of Abraham, even though they have persevered in a self-righteous pursuit of God, have not found God. They have not found the God they have been seeking because they believed - and still believe - that God is found through their own righteousness, which is achieved through their own religious and zealous self-efforts.

To this point, Paul has been using Scripture plus reason to present five reasons why he believes in the spiritual restoration of Israel. Now he continues to use Scripture, but he is describing how that mystery/miracle is going to happen. Everything Paul has now written in the ninth, tenth and in the first twenty-four verses of this eleventh chapter is a preparation for what he is now going to share with us. He writes: “For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own

opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.’ (Isaiah 59:20, 21)

“Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:25-29)

The first verse in this extraordinary passage of Scripture is where Paul refers to the way Israel rejects the Gospel as a mystery. As I have observed, this word “mystery” when we find it in the Bible describes a miracle that will only be possible by the supernatural power of Almighty God. A biblical mystery/miracle cannot be accounted for by natural means and the natural observation of man will not see what God is doing behind the scenes as He makes this miracle happen. This mystery/miracle is a supernatural happening and must be revealed to us, or we will never understand what God is doing in this event.

Paul and Old Testament prophets predict a mysterious secret regarding Israel that will eventually be revealed. That secret is the spiritual restoration of Israel as a nation, and that restoration certainly qualifies as a mystery, according to both ways the Bible uses that word.

The first dimension of this mystery is their resistance to the Gospel. If you have ever tried to present a verbal witness to a Jew, you may have personally encountered this resistance to the Gospel. According to Paul, their resistance to the Gospel is a mystery. God has supernaturally permitted a spiritual blindness on Israel and that mystery work of God accounts for this general resistance from Jews when the Gospel is presented to them.

We would think they would be so discouraged from so many centuries of trying to save themselves that they would be only too ready to hear about how the mercy of God can withhold from them what they deserve for their sins. We would think they would be ready, and even eager to hear about how God would like to lavish His grace upon them and give them the supernatural power that will make them new creatures in Christ, and do in and through them what they cannot do for themselves.

Paul found his victory through Christ. However, to work that victory into his journey of life and faith, God had to affect a supernatural intervention of the risen, living Christ in the life of this man. He then took him to the desert of Arabia for at least three years to work out the theology he writes in this letter to the Romans (Galatians 1-2:10).

The need for and the results of this intervention are especially obvious when we read, in the seventh and eighth chapters of this letter, his transparent and honest account of the struggle he had with sin and personal righteousness. The Jews for whom he is so

burdened throughout this entire letter have not had the blessed benefits of what Paul experienced when he met and was mentored by the risen Christ.

Although Paul emphatically believes that a spiritual awakening will come, he also emphasizes this blindness, which has been placed by God upon the Jews, according to Paul. He makes three observations about that blindness. His first observation is that this blindness is in part until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. By this he means what I have observed many times - not all Jews will experience this blindness.

His second observation is that this blindness will be for a limited time. Consistent with his prophecy of the spiritual restoration of the Jews, he writes that this blindness and resistance to the Gospel by the Jews will not last forever. Although it has lasted for twenty centuries, when he predicts this blindness until “The fullness of the Gentiles has come in,” (25) he is not referring to a specific number of Gentile conversions. This word “fullness” is also used in the twelfth verse of this chapter. There it is related to the fullness of the Jews: “Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!”

This fall and failure is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies forty years after Christ. Jewish worship liturgy was profoundly changed by that horrible event. They have never had a worship relationship with God like they had throughout their history after that event dispersed them into all the

nations of the world. When Paul refers to their fullness, he is referring to their spiritual fullness. He uses this same word in the same way here when he refers to the fullness of the Gentiles, which will mark the end of this period of spiritual blindness for the Jews.

I find this to be both exciting and challenging. The essence of this prophecy is that when the Gentile Church of Jesus Christ experiences spiritual fullness, that will arouse the envy of the Jews to the point that they will exclaim, “That is what we should be experiencing!” Sadly, there has been precious little church history that records the blindness of Jews being overcome by the spiritual fullness of the Church of the risen Christ. Church history is filled with examples of the direct opposite of this miracle. During the horrible Crusades, so-called Crusaders butchered Jews in the name of Christ.

The extraordinary prophecy of Paul and Old Testament prophets is a two-dimensional prophecy. The spiritual restoration of Israel is the obvious and most remarkable part of this prophecy. However, the other exciting dimension of this prophecy is that a revived spiritual fullness of the Church is forecast as the miracle milestone that will mark the end of this blindness God has caused the Jew to experience. The fullness of the Jews will follow in response to a mightily renewed and revived church, according to this prophecy.

We are beginning to see some signs of this two-fold prophecy being fulfilled today. My most beautiful experience of reaching a

Jewish man for Christ involved two years of friendship, and a group of twenty or more men and their wives who joined my wife and myself and loved this precious Jewish man and his wife to Christ. He started a Messianic synagogue and was able to bring many Jews to trust Jesus to be their Messiah (Christ), Savior and Lord.

This Jewish couple became believers because they were envious of the spiritual reality of God and Christ in the love and the lives of the devout disciples of Jesus who loved them to faith. I have seen this happen at least six more times as a pastor. However, I am convinced that what Paul is predicting, along with Old Testament prophets, is not simply a few Jews coming to faith in Christ. This prophecy is a national turning to God and Christ on the part of the Jewish people.

Prophets write that, “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; (Israel) for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.’ (Isaiah 59:20, 21) Jeremiah spells this out in more detail when he writes: “And this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33, 34)

There are two things Paul wants us to remember about the Jew: God loves them and God is not finished with them because the calling and the gifts of God are irrevocable. More than once Paul has asked the question, “Has God failed?” or, “Has God cast away His people?” In these three chapters, his answer is emphatically “No!” He wants the Gentile Church to know that “As concerning the Gospel the Jews are enemies for your sake, but for the sake of the fathers, they are beloved of God.” (11:28) In other words they may be enemies of the Gospel today, but God loves them and He has not finished His work with them.

He prophesies the strategy of provoking Israel to jealousy working to impact the entire world of nations for Christ when he writes: “For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.” (31, 32)

He then concludes these three awesome chapters with a quote from Isaiah, which is his benediction upon everything he has written in this letter from the very first word, but especially on all that he has written about Israel: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?’ Or who has first given

to Him and it shall be repaid to him?’ For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be glory forever. Amen.” (33-36)

This benediction Paul borrows from Isaiah raises some very good questions. How much does God know? Does God know what to do with what He knows? Does anyone really know the mind of God? Is it possible to search out, understand or question the judgments of God? Is anyone qualified to be the counselor of God? Does God owe anybody anything? Is there such a thing as a human being who has done so much for God that he or she has God in their debt?

The answers to these questions are so obvious they are almost funny. After dealing with the issues he has addressed in these three last chapters of the teaching section of this theological masterpiece, these questions and their answers are appropriate. God knows everything. Since wisdom is the application of what we know, God certainly knows what to do with what He knows. God is the source of all wisdom, so God has perfect wisdom. Since the judgments, or the actions of God are the expression of His infinite knowledge and perfect wisdom, questioning the actions of God is unthinkable. And God does not owe anybody, anything!

This prepares us for the benediction of Paul on everything he has written in this letter. Think through this entire letter, especially the perspective on the Providence of God Paul began sharing in the eighth chapter and continued through these last three chapters as you

read this benediction: “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be glory forever. Amen.” (11:36)

Paul is simply stating that God is the source of all things. God is the power behind all things, and the glory of God is the purpose for all things. When Paul uses these two words, “all things”, in this benediction, he means that God is the source, the power behind and the glory of God is the purpose for everything he has shared with us in this letter, especially that section of the eighth chapter that leads him into these last three chapters.

This benediction should become a life defining mission statement for all of us as we make priority value decisions regarding how we are going to spend our time, energy, gifts and all the resources over which God has made us accountable stewards. We should make the value judgment decision that we do not want to spend ourselves being involved in anything unless we can say that God is the source of that endeavor. We should not be involved in any mission objective unless we know that God will be the power behind that opportunity for service. Life is far too short and precious to be involved in anything unless we can say that the glory of God is the purpose for that undertaking.

I have made the point several times that we should ignore chapter divisions which were not in the original letter Paul wrote to the believers in Rome. These divisions were made in the 13th century and they frequently interrupt the thought and inspired logic of the Apostle Paul – especially in his letter to the Romans. This is

intensely true as Paul concludes this eleventh chapter and begins Chapter Twelve with that word “therefore.” This chapter division is probably the worst interruption of the inspired logic of this apostle in all of his New Testament letters.

The magnificent benediction Paul has borrowed from Isaiah should be followed immediately with these verses: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (12:1, 2)

The people who organized the New Testament placed the chapter division here because all of the letters of Paul divide into two sections. There is always a teaching section and then an application division of chapters in the letters of this apostle. However, in this case, the “therefore” introduces the only reasonable, logical and intelligent application we can make to his majestic benediction.

Since God knows everything, has perfect wisdom, since His actions are based on His perfect knowledge and wisdom, since He needs no counsel from man and owes no man anything. If God is the source, the power behind and His glory is the purpose or all things, it is only reasonable and logical to offer this God an unconditional surrender of our lives.

When Paul finishes the doctrinal, or teaching part of this letter at the end of the eleventh chapter, as he begins the application

section of his letter, his “therefore” is followed by the strong plea of the apostle. This strong appeal is addressed to those who have understood all this teaching, to throw up their hands and offer to God the application of a total, unconditional surrender to His good, acceptable and perfect will.

Paul labels this unconditional surrender to be the only intelligent application possible to all he has written, all the way back to the first chapter, which can possibly be acceptable to God. It is also the reasonable, intelligent worship of those who have believed in their hearts and confessed with their mouths that they believe Jesus is Lord. This is simply another way of confessing that Jesus is Lord.

The essence of this application can be paraphrased and summarized as if Paul is essentially writing: “If Jesus Christ is anything to you, then Jesus Christ is everything to you because, until Jesus Christ is everything to you, Jesus Christ is not really anything to you. If you believe all that I have written here, then surrender unconditionally to Christ and ask Him that question with which I began my spiritual journey with Christ, ‘Lord, what will you have me to do?’” (Acts 9:6)

There are millions of professing believers who confess Jesus as Savior, but somehow believe that confessing, “Jesus is Lord” is something they may or may not do later on in their journeys of faith. If you read the New Testament Gospels, or the letters of the apostles with an open mind, you must conclude that Jesus is to be confessed as Lord and then trusted to be Savior. Many want a Savior but do not

want a Lord to whom they must completely surrender.

We are also not instructed to accept Jesus as our Savior. The letters of the apostles tell us that God gave His Son that we might be accepted in the beloved (Ephesians 1:6). Those who merely “accept Jesus as Savior” need to carefully examine the exhortation of Paul referenced above with which he begins the application section of this letter.

Another question surfaces as we apply this prescription for salvation. That question is, “How do we confess with our mouths that we believe in our hearts in the death and resurrection of Jesus for our salvation?” A popular answer to that question is that we respond to a public invitation given by an evangelist in a public meeting. Millions have and do apply this prescription that way, by the grace and power of God and the anointed preaching of great evangelists. That is a good application of what Paul is prescribing here. However, that is not the only way to apply this teaching.

The critical issue here is that we have a spiritual dateline, a specific time when we surrender unconditionally to our Lord Jesus Christ. We must trust Jesus to be our Savior and we must crown Him as our Lord, be willing to die to self and to live for Him as “a living sacrifice”.

He specifically mentions our bodies and refers to our surrender of our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. In the Old Testament Jewish system of animal sacrifices, the sacrifices were always dead when they were offered to God. The concept of a living

sacrifice challenges his readers to not only be willing to die for Christ and God, but to live for them all day long every day. This living sacrifice is described as reasonable, or intelligent worship. Paul also tells us that this total and unconditional surrender is acceptable to God. The implication is that nothing less than this is acceptable to God.

This call to total commitment is very practical. The inspired applications of Paul always challenge us to bring what we say into alignment with the reality of how we live. This one challenges us to put our body where our mouth is. There are several practical instructions to follow. We must determine that we will not be conformed to the values and morals of the world in which we live. One translation reads that, “We should not let the world squeeze us into its own mold.” (J. B. Phillips)

In addition to this negative instruction, we are exhorted to: “Be transformed.” We are not being exhorted here to transform ourselves. The Scripture does not tell us to make the changes Paul is suggesting here. The prophet Jeremiah actually ridiculed the people of God for trying to change themselves. He asked the question, “Why do you try so hard to change yourselves? Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.” (Jeremiah 2:36; 13:23)

Prophets and apostles instruct and exhort the people of God to meet certain conditions, which make it possible for God to change them. Jesus instructed the Rabbi Nicodemus that we must be born

again (John 3:3-5). We cannot give birth to ourselves. Spiritual birth, like physical birth is a passive experience for those who are being born. It is something that happens to us. We read that we are born “of God” and that this experience is the work of God (John 1:12, 13; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18; 3:18). We cannot produce the change in ourselves that is described in the lives of those who have been born again.

As we conclude the third booklet on this letter of Paul to the Romans, may I ask, “Do you have a spiritual dateline? Have you confessed Jesus to be the Lord of your life? Have you trusted Jesus Christ to be your Savior and have you offered Him that unconditional surrender and asked Him, ‘Lord, what will you have me to do?’” You can do this in the privacy of your home, or really anywhere.

If you make this commitment of faith, contact us and we will send you written materials that will help you. If you have made that commitment I ask you, “Are you a living sacrifice?” “Are you partnering with God to share the Gospel with others so that they too may be spiritually freed from the bondage of sin and experience His wonderful grace?” “If not, why not?”

Be sure to get the next booklet, which will conclude our verse-by-verse study of this letter of Paul to the Romans.