

Lesson 22: Paul's Lament Over Israel

Romans 9:1-5

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,

² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.

³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren,

(1) my kinsmen according to the flesh,

(2) ⁴ who are Israelites,

(3) to whom belongs the adoption as sons,

and the glory

and the covenants

and the giving of the Law

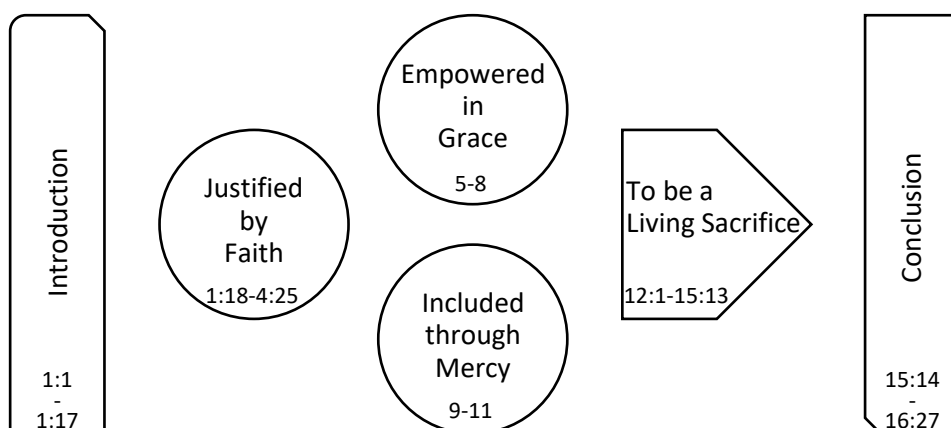
and the *temple* service

and the promises,

(4) ⁵ whose are the fathers,

(5) and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. NASB

Overview of Romans 1:18-4:25: God Includes through Mercy



The first five verses of chapter 9 introduce us to the next major section of Paul's argument in Romans. We will get to those verses in a moment. First, we should take a step back out and broaden our telescope as it were, so that we can see where we have come from and where we are going.

Looking Back Over Romans 1-8

In Romans 1-11 Paul describes for us how God displays his righteous power through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Starting in chapter 12 Paul urges us to respond to the gospel by living out our worship of God. We start with the theology of the gospel and move to the practice of the gospel. The theology of the gospel in chapters 1-11 consists of three major sections. We started with the core message of justification by faith in the grace of Jesus Christ. That was chapters 1-4, our first major section. The two following major sections in chapters 5-8 and chapters 9-11 each address a significant question that arises out of the gospel claim of justification by faith in that first section.

So, remembering back in that section at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul had begun his initial presentation of the gospel. On his way to indicting all of humanity, Paul targeted the pagan person, then the moral person and then the religious person. It was pretty clear that the indictment of the moral person and the religious person was an indictment of the Jew, who, possessing the law of God from Moses, had the best potential for proving himself righteous through morality or religion. By indicting the morality and religiousness of the Jew, the one under the very Law of God, Paul indicted all morality and all religion.

In the middle of that argument, Paul took a pause starting in 3:1 and ending at verse 8. Paul knew that his message draws out these two major objections; first, “What about the Jews?” and second, “What about sin?” The person listening closely to Paul would have heard him say that obedience to the Law of Moses is not required. That would be good listening. That was the direction Paul moved along. But if the Law of Moses is not required, then what place do the people of Israel have in the gospel of Jesus Christ? And not only that, if the Law of Moses is not required, then how does the gospel intend to curb sin and promote righteousness? In the end, does the gospel of Jesus Christ make God to be unfaithful to the Jewish people and unfaithful to his own righteous character? Paul responds to both accusations of unfaithfulness with his famous short answer, “By no means!” He has acknowledged the questions, but barely answered them. There is reason for that. The answer depends on finishing out his argument for justification by faith. Concluding that argument at the end of chapter 4, Paul then turns to a more robust response of the accusations.

Paul starts with the question, “What about sin?” That was the major question being answered in the section we just finished Romans 5-8. If there is no Law, what motive do people have to live righteously. This question gave Paul opportunity to argue the power of grace to transform. Grace provides a new identity. We are free from the guilt of sin, declared righteous, adopted as children. Grace provides a new union. We are unified with Jesus in his death and resurrection, indwelt and empowering by the Holy Spirit. Grace provides a new security in Christ. God justifies. God glorifies. Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? We are empowered, knowing that we might fall down, and we might fail, but we will never be cast out. And grace extends to us a new invitation to live according to who God is making us to be, children restored into the image of Jesus Christ. The motive of Law is outside of us. It presses upon us. The motive of grace arises in us by the removal of guilt, by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the security of his love and by this invitation to responsibility. These are the motives of grace. Does grace lead to sin? By no means! Grace empowers for righteousness.

So now we stand facing the second major objection to the gospel. What about Israel?

This is not simply a historical question or a secondary theological question. It is the question about whether or not God is a promise keeper? Is God faithful? The powerful ending of Romans chapter 8 comes into question for us if God was not faithful to the Jews before us. Paul declares that we are safe and secure in the unshakeable love of Jesus Christ. What happened to that love for Israel?

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine!
“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched,
Nor will the flame burn you. (Isaiah 43:1b-2)

Christians love verses from Isaiah. But those verses were not written to New Covenant believers. Those verses were written to the nation Israel. We just leave off the front bit, “But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine (Isaiah 43:1a)! ” “Israel, you are Mine!” Certainly, after Romans 8 we can imagine God saying the same thing to we who are in Christ. But this “You are Mine!” He said to Israel.

So, what of the promises to Abraham and to Moses, affirmed by Isaiah and Ezekiel? What do you call a man who abandons promises made to his first wife to be united to a younger bride? And what confidence ought that younger bride have in the fidelity of her husband who has shown himself unfaithful to his first love? This is not just a historical question about Israel. At issue here is the character of God and our confidence in his promises.

The promises of the new covenant rest on the character of God. For the gospel of Jesus Christ to maintain the character of God, a just answer must be given to the question, “What about Israel?”

That's where we are standing now, at the beginning of chapter 9 and Paul's defense of the faithfulness of God in regard to Israel.

The Gospel is the Power of God for the Salvation of - Group or Individual?

We've looked back at Romans 1-8 to see how we got here. Before we look ahead to the overall structure of Paul's answer in chapters 9-11, I want to address a theological issue that has come up in recent studies on Romans associated with what is called the New Perspective on Paul. This is the place to address briefly, just briefly, an important perspective of interpretation.

Paul addresses as one of his themes in Romans, the relationship of both Jew and Gentile to the gospel. We have seen that starting in the thesis statement and moving through chapters 1-8. Some proponents of the New Perspective on Paul argue that we should interpret all of Romans through a group lens, rather than an individual lens. They would recognize the Jew/Gentile issue as the primary issue of the letter. They would also say that Paul's primary emphasis is on the different ways the gospel affects Jews as a group and Gentiles as a group.

I agree that the Jew/Gentile issue is one that Paul traces throughout his argument. I disagree that it is primary. The Jew/Gentile issue is the context into which Paul writes. But the gospel of Jesus Christ and particularly God's power and righteousness revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the primary theme of Paul's message in the letter to the Romans. We do not want to make the mistake of pulling the contextual background of Jew/Gentile into the foreground.

Paul emphasizes that the gospel applies to Jew and Gentile both the same. Jews and Gentiles come to the cross from different places, but the cross saves each person the same by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. There is no difference. We can see that Paul has not been addressing groups in Romans 1-8. He has been addressing individuals. Individuals are held accountable for their sin. Individuals are declared righteous through the act of faith, an individual act. Individuals are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, adopted as children, and predestined to be conformed into the image of Christ. Though we might be able to communicate some of these realities as applying to a group, for example the Spirit indwells the body of Christ, and God may be said to predestine Israel, to this point in this letter Paul's message of salvation by faith has been clearly applied to individuals.

This is not to say that the gospel is individualistic. We are born again into a community. It is to say that the gospel applies at its most fundamental level to the individual. I can meet with an individual man or woman or child and share with them the wonderful news that Paul has communicated about the gospel of Jesus Christ in this letter to the Romans. And that man or woman or child then has a choice and an opportunity to receive by faith the grace of God as an individual act of the will.

I am reminded of the words of a Moravian missionary to the struggling Anglican priest John Wesley. Wesley was afraid during a storm on his way to the new world. The missionary asked Wesley a question, "Do you know that Christ has died for you?" Wesley responded, "I know that Christ died for the sins of the world." The missionary wisely came back, "Yes, but do you know that Christ died for you?" Wesley said, "Yes," but later wrote in his journal that the answer in his heart was, "No." This question does not get answered for us by our parents or our community. The gospel is not individualistic, but the gospel is intensely personal. God intends to remake you as a person. You have to answer for yourself, "Do you yourself know that Jesus Christ has died for you? And have you yourself accepted this gift of grace as an act of faith?" And if you have, you yourself can be sure, you can be secure in the love the Jesus Christ has for you. You yourself have an individual, personal relationship with your creator. We must be able to address the gospel to one another as individual human beings, who bear the image of God, and yes, who are being brought together in a new family and new community. We are individuals living in groups, families, and communities.

This may have seemed obvious to you over the course of our study so far. Good. I do not want to address a problem you do not have. I want to make you aware of a trend in studies on Romans. More importantly, I want you to get ready for a shift. Though the focus has been on the individual up to

this point, we are getting ready to talk about groups. Romans 9-11 addresses group and individual. It is a shift that makes sense now that we have come to the question, “What about Israel?” Israel is not an individual. Israel is a group or a corporate entity. We are talking about the people of God. That’s going to be our question, “Who are the people of God?” We will need to keep that in mind as we go. That’s all I will say about that now. I think our shift to talk about groups will make a lot of sense and become obvious once we get into chapter 9.

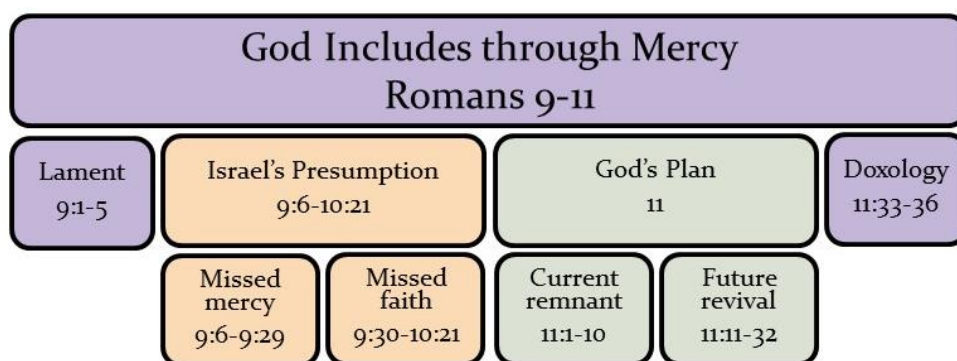
Looking Ahead Over Romans 9-11

We still have our telescope out broadly. We looked back at 1-8, now let’s survey 9-11. I again encourage you to check out the resources at observetheword.com. You will find an overview chart on Romans, and in the text for this lesson you will see a chart for Romans 9-11, the chart I am getting ready to explain right now.

I titled this major section “God includes through mercy.” We’ve had “God justifies by faith,” “God empowers in grace,” and now “God includes through mercy.” The word mercy is emphasized in this section. Even more than the special emphasis on the word faith in 1-4 and the word grace in 5-8, Paul reserves mercy for this particular context, for this conversation about Israel. Paul does not use the Greek word for mercy at all in chapters 1-8, 9 times in 9-11, and then only twice after chapter 11.

The use of the word Israel also helps us recognize our primary subject for this section. Though he refers to Israel 11 times in chapters 9-11, Paul does not refer to Israel at all before or after. It’s just these three chapters.

Paul starts the section with a personal lament for Israel, that’s in 9:1-5. And he ends the section with a doxology or statement of praise in 11:33-36. So, we start with a prayer and end with a prayer. In between these two short prayers, Paul addresses Israel’s presumption about their relationship with God in chapters 9-10. Then Paul addresses God’s plan for Israel in chapter 11. God’s plan will include both a current remnant and a future revival. Israel’s presumption will include their misunderstanding of God’s mercy and their misunderstanding of the role of faith.



Missed mercy, (3) Missed faith, (4) Current remnant, (5) Future revival and (6) Doxology.

Paul has some tough words for Israel in this section. They have presumed upon God his commitment to their position as the center of his people. The pride inherent in their presumption resulted in a hardness of heart and a misunderstanding of both God’s mercy and the role of faith. Paul is going to have to address such hardness of heart straight on. It will not sound nice at places.

But Paul does not jump into his argument with guns blazing. Israel is not his enemy. Paul starts with a lament. Let’s read that.

Paul’s Lament (9:1-5)

[Read Romans 9:1-5]

This is not a poetic lament, like one of the lament Psalms. It is a prose lament. A prayer that you would speak out loud to God that expresses the sorrow of a lamentation. Paul expresses deep

sadness over the religious state of his fellow Jews. He is getting ready to tell us that their presumption prevents them from receiving God's plan of salvation. They are like Habakkuk, calling for righteous salvation, but upon hearing God's plan, they take a defiant stand on the wall, exclaiming, "Surely this cannot be it. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not worthy of our righteous God." With two feet firmly planted, they reject the good news to await a plan they can endorse. Unlike Habakkuk, there is no move to humility, no change of vision, no seeing with the spiritual eyes of faith, no submission to God's outrageous plan.

And though Paul must expose this prideful presumption, he is not gleeful at the destruction of the Jews. He is not vindictive. He is not self-righteous. He knows that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12)." His heart agrees with the heart of Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)."

Paul wants us to know, before getting into his argument, that the argument does not come out of an emotional negativity against the Jews or any kind of intolerance. On the contrary, Paul's heart grieves that the vast majority of Israelites misunderstand the mercy of God.

Paul's Heart for Israel (9:1-3)

Reading Paul's lament, we need to keep in mind the emotional tone of the words. That's the reason for the piling up of phrases. The language of verses 1 and 2 sound like someone trying to convince his hearers of his inner state. "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart."

I do not think Paul is worried about the Romans believing him. He knows they do not think he is lying. The repetition is not to convince them of the truthfulness of his statements, but to convey the reality in his heart. The repetition communicates to us emotionally. "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit..."

They may have picked up a negativity towards the Jewish position in his argument so far. They may have heard from others that Paul is a man opposed to the Jews. He wants them to know this is not the case. He wants them to know the state of his heart, "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief." He wants us listen to what he feels.

He goes on to make a surprising, even shocking, claim in verse 3, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren..." I have heard discussion about this verse that centers on whether it is really possible for a true believer to desire himself cut off from Christ for the sake of someone else. I think that line of discussion veers off in the wrong direction. This is a statement of emotion from Paul. I think it is certainly possible for Paul to feel this way, especially when we think about who felt this way before Paul. Whose feelings do Paul's feelings mirror? I think we could say Jesus. How is it possible, rationally, to think of Jesus desiring spiritual separation from God? And yet for our sake Jesus did desire to be accursed and forsaken – and so he was. The heart of Paul reflects the compassionate heart of Christ.

Of course, Christ is in a category unique, all alone. But there is another who came before Paul whose heart expressed these same thoughts. Do you know before Paul expressed this desire to be cut off from life with God for the sake of Israel? Do you know who said that and where it was? It's Moses. Moses prays to God in Exodus 32:32, after the sin of the golden calf, "But now, if you will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from your book which you have written." He says, "Blot me out. Cut me off from your life." The interaction between Moses and God in Exodus 32 provides a classic example of how God draws the worshipper's heart up into his own through prayer, through prayer, through conversation and dialogue. After the golden calf incident, Moses comes down off the mountain, with his anger burning against his fellow Israelites. It is a just, but pale reflection of God's righteous nature. God allows Moses to experience more fully the burning anger of righteousness in his own declaration that he is going to destroy the nation of Israel. You want to know burning anger? God can show you burning anger. He communicated to Moses his glory in the burning justice of his holiness.

And I think the effect is just as God intended. The heat of his wrath drew out an opposing emotion in Moses. Moses was angry, but when God was really angry, then Moses responds with compassion. When Moses' anger burned, God communicated to Moses the truth of righteous anger, the extent to which wrath must go to bring justice on those who spit in the face of the one true and holy God. Faced with the reality of burning wrath, Moses relents. His heart moves to compassion, and he begins to intercede on behalf of Israel.

The text actually says that God relents, that God changes his mind (Exodus 32:14). But that must be understood according to God's purpose with Moses, the dialogue. What was God doing. God certainly was always fully aware of the demand for justice and the need for compassion. Both realities are always ever present in the heart and mind of God. He chooses which to express and which to act on according to his own wisdom. I believe God intended to show the one in order to draw out the other. In this interaction between God and Moses, this dialogue or prayer, it is Moses' heart that undergoes transformation as he experiences the double reality of justice and compassion. The interaction between God and Moses continues from chapter 32 to chapter 33 all the way into chapter 34, climaxing as God reveals the truth of his character in the declaration of his name. The Lord proclaims his name, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished... (Exodus 34:6-7)." That is the tension of true justice and great mercy.

Paul has experienced a similar tension in his heart. The reality of the gospel brings together the grace and mercy of God with his righteous justice. He will grant mercy, but not to those who refuse to accept it. And so, Paul is grieved deeply in his soul as he thinks about all the blessings God has showered onto his fellow Israelites and the irony that, like the elder brother in the prodigal son story, the most blessed refuse to enter into the feast because it is too easy.

The Blessings Belonging to Israel (9:4-5)

Highlighting the tragic irony of Israel's rejection, Paul lists out these historic blessings on Israel. At first he lists a couple of items that affirm his relationship to the Jews. He says they are his kinsmen by flesh and blood. They are also Israelites, the descendants of Jacob who were of the same people. The third item in Paul's description of his brethren is the list of blessings that belong to the Israelites. The effect for Paul in piling up the items is to create this whole sense of blessing, that they have all of this, and yet, they have rejected Christ.

All these things were meant to point the Israelites to Jesus. They have the adoption of sons. They did not always do well with that. Isaiah says at the beginning of his prophecy, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against me." There was always this tension of being a son and not acting like a son. That's the question. The adoption begs the question, how can we who sin and rebel, how can we be accepted securely as sons and daughters of our God who is holy? How can we be sure of our position with God? And for generations God just said, "Trust me. Trust me. I have got you." But now in Christ he has shown the answer that the prophets longed to see. This is how you sinful human beings can be my children, how you can be made acceptable. This is it Israel. But Israel rejects the answer.

All the other items of the list came to Israel as shadows, wonderful shadows, but still shadows of a more wonderful reality. And yet, Israel would prefer to hold on to and define themselves by the shadow of the truth, rather than embracing the truth itself. They have the glory of God declared by the word of God to Moses in his name and expressed by light shining out of the tabernacle. But then God came in full expression as a man. John says it this way, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory (John 1:14)." The glory is Jesus. Everything else was pointing to Jesus. Along with the glory, Israel had the covenants made with Abraham and renewed with Isaac and with Jacob. And then a new covenant with Moses. But all of these pointed to a better covenant, a better sacrifice, a better high priest, to Jesus. They received the righteousness of Law given through

Moses. They answer to how they should live. But then when a new and better righteousness comes along in grace that introduces them to life of Jesus, they turn it down. They embraced the temple service but reject the true service of baptism in Christ and communion with him through the bread and the wine. They hold on to the promises made to Israel, while rejecting the fulfilment of those promises in Jesus. They rightly look back to their heritage. "We are those who come from the fathers." But then they miss the heart of the fathers. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad (John 8:58)." They reject the true glory of Israel. This is the true glory of Israel that the Messiah Jesus Christ chose to come to earth as a Jew. They turn their eyes from the goal of all these blessings, in order to hold onto the shadowy forms of their traditions. They would rather play at religion than enter into relationship with the heavenly father. And because of this, Paul experiences "great sorrow and unceasing grief...for the sake of [his] brethren." This is his lament.

Applying Romans 9:1-5 to Our Own Culture

The heart given over to God rightly responds at times to sin with righteous anger. When God is dishonored and people are harmed, it is right to be angry. I think it is even more right to be angry when the ones dishonoring God and harming his children claim themselves to be his people. The anger burning in Moses on Mount Sinai was aroused by fellow Israelites, not Egyptians.

The context for Paul is a cultural claim by his people, the Jews, to be the people of God, even while denying the gospel of Jesus Christ. We see that all around us. As an American, I want to like that the American dollar bill displays the claim, "In God we trust." But we don't really, not as a people. Not even if we only count those who proclaim to be Christian. America still has a majority claiming to be Christian, but the majority of that Christian majority rejects the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can look at another nation. Where I live, Croatians have their saying, "Bog i Hrvati." It means "God and the Croatians." And even though the majority of Croatians claim to be Roman Catholic Christians, still the majority of the majority reject the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you live in a Christianized nation how do you feel about those who hold onto the name of Christ while rejecting the truthfulness of his teaching, both with their beliefs and with their behavior? How do you feel about those who politicize Christianity, connecting it with this party or that party or this nation or that nation? How do you feel about the cultural Christians in your society?

Here is the punch that hit my gut reading Paul. I'll ask you the same way that it hit me. Does your heart echo the heart of Moses, Paul, Christ when you pray for the Christian culture around you? Do you pray these words from the heart, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart for my fellow countrymen who claim the name Christian. I could wish myself accursed on their behalf that they would not rest on their cultural presumption even while they reject the gospel of grace in Jesus. They are my family, they are my neighbors, they are my countrymen. To them belong the church fathers, missionaries and preachers, the whole Bible, baptism, the bread and the wine, the testimony of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the proclamation of the cross and of grace and the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They claim the name little Christ, Christian. They are so close to eternal life with Christ and yet, their cultural Christianity has given them an inoculation, just enough Christianity to prevent them from catching the real thing. I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart for them."

We are called to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to disagree with those who claim special relationship with God while denying the life, death, resurrection and grace of Jesus. But before we do, we need a heart check. "Seeing the people, Jesus felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36)." We are called to tolerance, but not the way the modern world uses the word. There is a great cancer that eats away at the souls of men and women. "Human beings are at once the most wonderful and most miserable of all God's creatures (Peter Kuzmić)." We see the image of God in every man, every

woman, every child. We also see a cancer that eats away at that image, a disease of the soul that separates people from God. They cannot find a cure without accepting the fact of the disease. We cannot love them by blindly ignoring the tragic truth of their condition. We must speak.

The message of Paul that follows in Romans 9-11 may be taken as intolerance against Jewish people. It is not. It is intolerance against the state of sin that blinds his fellow countrymen to their own need and so, prevents them from drinking the true medicine of their cure, the clear, cool, living water of Jesus Christ.

That is the question we have to ask ourselves. Do I grieve over the condition of the sick around me? Do I love them enough to speak clearly about the problem, not to attack, not to demean, not to hate, but to love, to speak clearly in this society that Jesus Christ is the hope of every man, and every woman, and every child?

Reflection Questions

1. As a New Covenant believer, what is your own personal interest in addressing the question, “What about the Jews?” What kind of insight do you hope to get from Romans 9-11?
2. Re-read Romans 2:28-3:1-4. Why does it seem to you that Paul raises the question, “What about the Jews?” And what stands out to you in his brief answer?
3. Now, looking at chapter 9, what stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 9:1-5?
4. What is Paul’s intent with this lament? What do you think he intends to communicate about himself? What does he intend to communicate about Israel?
5. What are some of the blessings possessed by the religious culture in your society? You could answer this according to your own denomination and according to the broader cultural tradition?
6. How do you apply Paul’s compassion for the Jews to your own cultural and religious environment? Does the state of Paul’s heart challenge you?