

Romans 9:1-5

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Throughout Romans, Paul has been refuting slanderous charges made by competing Jewish authorities about his gospel message. Paul is deeply sad that Israel, as a nation, has rejected Christ. Israel is God's chosen nation, and Paul wishes that every Israelite had faith in Christ.

After rebuking the slander of the competing Jewish "authorities" throughout chapters 1–8, Paul takes the time to explain Israel's current status in chapters 9–11, and answers a different version of slanderous charges. Before beginning his argument, he appeals to the authority of Christ saying, *I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit* (v 1).

The competing Jewish "authorities" in Rome are mainly trying to get the Gentile believers to follow Jewish law, specifically their interpretation of the Law. That would put the Gentiles under their rule, since they would determine who is condemned.

It follows that the competing Jewish "authorities" would also argue that if the Law no longer applies, then God has rejected the Jews. The Law was an integral part of God's covenant with Israel. "If you live according to the Law, I will bless you," as in Deuteronomy 30, which Paul will refer to in the next chapter. So, the competing "authorities" would argue that if the Law is rejected then God's relationship with Israel is rejected.

However, in verses 1–5, Paul makes clear that God has not rejected the benefit of the Temple or religious practice for Jews. Paul just asserts that these things simply do not produce righteousness in humans.

The overall question raised in Paul's letter to the Roman believers is the question "What is righteousness, and how can it be achieved?" The clear argument of the competing Jewish "authorities" is that righteousness can only come one way, through the law and through the Jews. The clear argument of Paul is that righteousness can only come one way, through faith, from beginning to end (Romans 1:17). Paul has asserted that righteousness comes through living by faith (Romans 1:17). Righteous living comes through walking in the Spirit, and when believers walk in the Spirit they actually fulfill the Law (Romans 8:4).

Paul is an Israelite himself, and he is profoundly upset that the nation of Israel rejected Christ, saying *that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart* (v 2). It was the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who demanded Jesus be put to death, and when the people of Jerusalem were given the chance to free Jesus, they demanded He be put to death, just like their leaders wanted (Matthew 27:22).

Even though some Israelites put their faith in Christ, the gospel is spreading much more rapidly to the Gentile nations at the time of the writing of this letter. In Romans 1:8, Paul says that the Roman Christians' faith is being talked about throughout the whole world; conversely, he's had

to deal with false teachings from competing Jewish “authorities” in Rome, who have misrepresented his gospel and are trying to lead Roman believers to submit themselves to the Old Testament Law.

In this letter, Paul is directing the believers toward faith, obedience, the Holy Spirit, and God’s grace, and away from legalism, rules, and slavery to sin. It grieves Paul that Israel, as a nation, rejected Christ, so much so that he wishes he could be cut off from the blessings of God if it would make room for his kinsmen: *For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh* (v 3).

The Greek word translated *accursed* is “anathema.” It is used in Acts to describe an oath some Jewish leaders took against themselves if they failed to kill Paul, there being translated as “under a solemn oath”:

“They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, ‘We have bound [“anathematize”] ourselves under a solemn oath [“anathema”] to taste nothing until we have killed Paul.”
(Acts 23:14)

The idea seems to be “We are willing to wish upon ourselves the worst possible fate if we aren’t able to accomplish this thing.” Paul might *wish* that he could do this, but the passage infers that he realizes this is futile, because it is not his choice. Thus he says *I could wish*. The point seems to be “I would be willing to put myself under this great consequence if I were able to do something to change them.” His point seems to be that he really cares, but is limited on what he is able to do.

Paul’s language is meant to communicate how sorrowful he is that Israel is in its current state. Neither he nor God have given up on the Israelites, despite Paul’s ministry being largely geared toward Gentiles.

God chose Israel to be His nation and His people. In the Old Testament, He freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. From then on He was their God, giving them the law, making promises and covenants with them, dating even further back to the father of the nation: Abraham. Paul explains the special opportunity his kinsmen had, *who are Israelites, 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, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen* (vv 4–5).

This list of benefits shows that Paul recognizes the esteemed position the Jews have been given:

- Israel possesses the right of *adoption as sons*.

We can get an idea what Paul means by *adoption as sons* by looking at the previous chapter where he used the same word translated as *belongs the adoption as sons* (“*huiiothesia*”). In the following verse, “*huiiothesia*” is translated as “of adoption as sons”:

“For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons [“*huiiothesia*”] by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”
(Romans 8:15).

This seems to indicate that Paul here is speaking of being born into God's family as His child. This passage in Romans 8:15 speaks of those who are born as children into God's family through faith; they simply receive a gift that is given. This passage in Romans 9 speaks of the nation of Israel, who God calls His "son" (Exodus 4:22). God birthed Israel by His grace, and made Israel His "son."

- Israel has the *glory, and the covenants and the giving of the Law*.

God gave His *Law* to Israel, as well as the *covenants* of the treaty/covenant between Himself and the nation. These showed Israel how to live in a manner that would provide them great blessing. He taught them to develop a love-your-neighbor-as-yourself culture, which develops trust, collaboration, and mutual flourishing. This gave Israel the *glory* of being appointed as a priestly nation, to show the other nations how to live in a manner that would lead to great flourishing (Exodus 19:6).

- Israel has been given the *temple service*.

The *temple service* presented a picture of the sacrifice of Christ who was to come. It also presented the reality that God passed over sins by His grace (Leviticus 16).

- Israel has been given the *promises*.

Israel has been given many *promises*, including the promise of the land, the blessings of the covenant, and the perpetual reign of the Son of David, the Messiah, to rule over them.

- Israel has the *fathers* who are their patriarchs, and whom God loves, and will keep His promises because of His love for them (Romans 11:28-29).
- Israel is the vehicle through which came Jesus *the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all*.

But although Israel has all these benefits, Christ was rejected by the leaders and people of Israel. It grieves Paul that his own people are separated from God. All of their history should have led them to accept Christ, but they rejected Him. As a result, they missed the opportunity for the "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:19) and the fulfillment of the *promises* for their great blessing through the reign of their Messiah.

However, Paul will make it very clear that God is not rejecting Israel although Israel has rejected God. In fact, Paul will tell us that all the promises to Israel will be fulfilled, and the believing Gentiles will play a key role in the fulfillment.

Biblical Text

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, my kinsmen according to the flesh, ⁴ who are Israelites, 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, ⁵

**whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all,
God blessed forever. Amen.**