

IV. The Veracity of the Gospel - The Problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)

As seen, Paul's formal interaction with the doctrines of the gospel ended with verse 8:30. That interaction began appropriately with the foundational truth of justification by faith, and culminated with Paul's consideration of the secure and exultant hope that the believer has by virtue of Christ's atoning work. He showed that Christian hope is a phenomenon implicating the believer's past, present, and future, and that this hope cannot disappoint because it finds its source, substance, and security in the purpose and work of the triune God. Thus Paul concluded his treatment of the gospel with a jubilant doxology capped by his proclamation that nothing can separate the believer from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

This proclamation, together with the content that led up to it, is the foundation for the succeeding section (9:1-11:36). In the estimation of many, this is the most difficult context in the entire epistle; undoubtedly it is the most debated. Several reasons may be given for this, but two primary ones overarch the others:

- The first and most obvious is that this passage of Scripture is unique in its treatment of the much contested issue of Israel and its relation to the New Covenant Church. Nowhere else does the New Testament deal with this subject matter so directly and thoroughly. The result is that these three chapters tend to be the focal point for discussion regarding Israel's present and future place in God's redemptive program.
- The second reason is that Paul's argumentation in this context implicates such topics as election, predestination, and reprobation. This makes it a lightning rod for debates related to Calvinism and Arminianism. In fact, to many in Calvinistic circles, the ninth chapter of Romans is familiar only as a solid proof text for these doctrines of divine sovereignty.

In and of themselves, the above issues are far from simplistic, as the broad diversity of interpretations demonstrates. But Paul's argumentation regarding them becomes much more obscure when other obstacles are placed in the way. These interpretive impediments are numerous and varied, but the two most significant will be considered here. It is hoped that this discussion will serve to clear these obstacles before ever entering into the text itself, thereby facilitating a more objective and contextual understanding of Paul's teaching.

1. The first obstacle is the greatest, in that it presents the most serious threat to accurate interpretation. That obstacle is the *systematic/doctrinal presuppositions* the believer brings with him to the text.

A presupposition is an *a priori* conviction; that is to say, it is a previously existing conviction that a person brings to bear in his various interactions with people, ideas, arguments, etc. This being the case, a presupposition acts to *drive* one's consideration; it does not *result* from it. Presuppositions not only determine the questions a person asks, they provide the grid for interpreting the answers he receives. For this reason they always greatly influence – if not effectively determine – one's conclusions in a given matter. And because a presupposition is a belief or conclusion that a person has already accepted as true, *it is not a part of his conscious reasoning process.*

Thus the danger of presuppositions is that they drive a person's thought process and conclusions, without his being consciously aware that they are doing so. He *thinks* he is being absolutely objective in his consideration, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. His presuppositions permit him the *sense* that his conclusions have resulted from careful, objective reasoning, but their invisibility insures that he rarely asks himself *how* he knows what he knows; he never stops to think that what he "knows" may not be so.

And so it is that in any reasoning process – not simply in biblical interpretation – every person is obligated to recognize and understand his own presuppositions. Only then will he be able to prevent them from dictating the outcome of his consideration. Those who believe they have no presuppositions (in whatever matter) are self-deluded; no one can avoid them. In fact, the natural process of personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth insures that presuppositions will exist, and this is as it ought to be. Presuppositions provide a grid for life so that a person is not constrained to "reinvent the wheel" every time he is faced with a new situation or consideration. *They become dangerous obstacles only when the person does not recognize them and/or cannot objectively substantiate their legitimacy.* The question is never whether a person "knows"; the question is **how** he knows what he knows. Failure to ask and answer this question insures that a person will be an *obscurantist*: demonstrable facts will only provide a distraction and point of confusion, for he is already convinced in his own mind.

In the realm of theological inquiry, the most influential presuppositions are those that are *doctrinal* and *systematic*. Again, it is important to note that all Christians (and even non-Christians) have these presuppositions; the issue at hand is to consciously recognize them and substantiate their biblicity.

Doctrinal presuppositions take a myriad of forms, and arise from any number of sources. In general, they originate from a combination of one's own study, the teaching that has been received, and informal input from other influential people. The most important source of doctrinal presuppositions is the particular theological *system* one embraces. Though they may be unaware of it, every Christian operates within some systematic thought framework, for the human mind cannot effectively interact with independent, unrelated pieces of data. All knowledge is *relative* in the sense that data, from whatever source, is processed and understood by correlating it with what is already known.

*What this means is that everything is **necessarily** discerned, interacted with, and judged on the basis of some datum or set of understood and accepted criteria.*

This is true of biblical knowledge as well. The Bible cannot be interacted with as if it were a collection of unrelated information. In order to be understood, biblical content must be compiled and correlated in some manner. But the way in which it is correlated – and even the particular categories one adopts in the correlation process – is determined by overall *systematic* presuppositions. In other words, a person has no idea how to compile, correlate, and interpret individual pieces of biblical data unless he first has some overall structure and definition within which to think and work. *The system he has adopted effectively tells him how to interact with the information he is acquiring.*

Thus, a person's theological system is the grid through which he reads and interprets the Bible. *It is the "first principle" of his interaction with the text, and is therefore the overarching presupposition in his biblical interpretation.* This is the reason it is vitally important for every Christian to recognize and understand the basis, substance, and implications of his overall system. As with any presupposition, the failure to follow this path insures the believer's self-delusion that he is simply reading and interpreting the text without any bias or unbiblical influence.

In contemporary Evangelicalism there are two primary theological systems: *Dispensationalism* and *Covenant Theology*. Other interpretive approaches exist (such as *redemptive-historical* hermeneutics), but the majority of American evangelical Christians are predominantly influenced in their Bible interpretation by one (or both) of the first two. These two systems are themselves characterized by variations, but will be addressed here in terms of the pertinent doctrines that are foundational to them, whatever particular form they make take.

- a. *Dispensationalism* is by far the most common theological system in American evangelical Christianity. As it implicates Romans 9-11, the most important feature of Dispensationalism is its emphasis on the distinction between Israel and the Church. In the most general terms, this system views salvation history as existing within the framework of discrete epochs or "dispensations." Each dispensation is marked by God's unique interaction with a particular group of people. What this means in terms of the Israel/Church issue is that God's saving "program" for Israel is distinct from His program for the Church.

Historically, the present church-age has been viewed by dispensationalists as a parenthesis in redemptive history, the reason being that God's salvation of His chosen people Israel is the focal point of His redeeming purpose and work. Dispensationalism teaches that Israel's rejection of Christ put the coming of His kingdom (as promised to Israel in the Old Testament) on hold and caused Him to divert His work in the present age to the largely Gentile Church. It is when Christ returns and Israel receives her messiah that the promised "millennial kingdom" will be inaugurated, and God's program for the Jews will finally be accomplished.

This conviction that Israel and the Church are two separate entities, having two distinct programs in God's saving purpose, is fundamental to dispensational theology. Whatever differences may exist between them, all dispensationalists agree on the Israel/Church distinction. This being so, it is apparent why Romans 9-11 is a crucial passage for Dispensationalism. It also provides insight into why dispensationalists read and interpret this context the way they do.

- b. The second major system is *Covenant Theology*. This system is associated with historical Reformed Theology, and finds its best known expression in the Westminster Standards. Like Dispensationalism, its adherents hold varying positions on some matters, but it is uniformly characterized by the conviction that all of salvation history since the Fall has been governed by one *covenant of grace*.

In other words, both the Old and New Covenants are regarded fundamentally as different administrations of the same covenant. What this means is that, in substance, the same covenant that governed the relationship between God and Old Testament Israel now governs His relationship with His Church.

The implication of this view is that theocratic Israel and the new covenant Church are essentially the same entity, being distinguished primarily by the period in which they exist. Israel was the people of God – the *Church* – up until the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the “new covenant” administration of the one covenant of grace. This perspective is evident in Puritan writings, which routinely refer to Israel as the Church. Given their conviction regarding the historical relationship between Israel and the Church, it is easy to see why Reformed people approach Romans 9-11 the way they do.

Their respective understanding of the Israel/Church issue is just one matter that distinguishes these two systems, but since it is a fundamental presupposition of each system, it explains why dispensationalists and Reformed Christians interpret these three chapters so differently. *Each group comes to the text with certain assumptions already in place, and those “givens” necessarily act as the grid through which the passage is read and understood.*

This means that the objectivity claimed by theologians on both sides is an illusion; each interpreter’s understanding is strongly influenced by the system he embraces. In the end, no one is truly objective. But it is important to reiterate that doctrinal and systematic presuppositions are not inherently or absolutely wrong; the crucial issue is to recognize and understand those presuppositions and substantiate them as biblical. This means demonstrating their biblical correctness, not from a series of proof-texts, but from the entire fabric of the Scripture.

2. This observation leads into the second obstacle to proper interpretation. It is not strictly tied to theological systems, but instead results from natural patterns of human thinking. This obstacle is *proof-texting*. Proof-texting is the process of using discrete, apparently related pieces of biblical content in order to construct and/or support Christian doctrine. Because it is consistent with the way people naturally think, it is the most common method of biblical interaction – so common, in fact, that many Christians are unaware that there is any other way to use the Bible.

Yet it is inherently erroneous because it proceeds upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the Bible’s nature and structure. Proof-texting effectively denies the Scripture’s organic and progressive quality. In practice it views the Bible as both *flat* and *fragmented*, as evidenced by the fact that every piece of biblical content is treated as if it were independent and equally relevant to Christians. For example, if the proof-text interpreter were to seek to understand the Bible’s teaching on divorce, he would compile all the individual passages in both testaments that address divorce, and then conjoin them into a composite “biblical” doctrine of divorce.

Proof-text interpretation is thus a kind of theological democratic process. The relevance of a given verse to the matter at hand is determined by its bare content (often only through word associations). It is taken exactly as it sits on the page without any consideration for its function in the development of salvation and revelation history. This process is continued until all apparently relevant verses are gathered. Then, in a “one passage, one vote” fashion, the individual contributions of the various texts are summed together to produce the biblical teaching on the particular subject.

Considering again the previous example, the proof-texting approach means that the Christian doctrine of divorce will draw upon Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Malachi 2:14-16 in the same way that it does other passages such as Matthew 19:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. The practical consequence is that the Christian comes to believe that Moses’ instruction to Israel is just as pertinent and vital to his counsel to a divorcing believer as is Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians.

Despite the serious errors of proof-texting, Christians very naturally and confidently use the Bible in this way. In many instances this practice is reinforced from the pulpit. Knowing that the whole Bible is inspired, they falsely conclude that they can “put their finger” on any passage in it and directly apply its teaching exactly as it sits on the page. This approach would be valid if the Bible were a book of recipes or a repair manual; every recipe or repair procedure could stand on its own. But for an organic and progressive body of revelation, proof-texting is disastrous.

At bottom, proof-texting is a process of biblical isolationism. It leads the reader to interact with a given passage – here, Romans 9-11 – without recognizing how it continues and contributes to Paul’s larger argument in the epistle. Rather than being read within the overall structure and flow of the letter, these chapters tend to be treated as an isolated context. Even more narrowly, it is not uncommon for smaller passages within the larger one to be considered by themselves. The result is the loss of the forest on account of the trees; Paul’s intended emphases are missed by focusing on fragmented details.

Thus many scholars have viewed Romans 9-11 as a parenthesis, a detour, or an extraneous doctrinal insertion that has no real connection with the flow of Paul’s argument. But such a premise insures that the interpreter will miss the significance of the passage. Douglas Moo’s comment is very pertinent:

“Those who relegate chaps. 9-11 to the periphery of Romans have misunderstood the purpose of Rom. 9-11, or of the letter, or of both.”

An extension of this problem is the tendency to use this passage to establish the biblicity of certain doctrines that happen to be implicated in it, whether or not the matters in question are central to Paul’s argument. The point of connection becomes the doctrinal “cross-reference,” rather than the overall sense or emphasis of the passage in which it is found. Prime examples of this are Calvinists using Romans 9-11 to prove the doctrines of election and reprobation (9:6-24), and dispensationalists using it to demonstrate the salvation of “all Israel” when the “times of the Gentiles” will be complete (11:25-26).

It is both significant and telling that dispensationalists use these chapters to substantiate their presupposition of a separate redemptive program for Israel, while Reformed people use the very same content to show that the Church and Israel are fundamentally the same entity. Both cannot be right, and yet both equally claim objectivity and a careful adherence to the text. The determination of which interpretation – if either – is correct can only be made by interacting with the totality of biblical revelation in accordance with the Bible's own structure and self-understanding. *Reasoning from the vantage point of systematic presuppositions or further proof-texting will only exacerbate the confusion.*

In view of these obstacles, how should the reader approach Romans 9-11? These chapters clearly do reflect a transition on Paul's part. His formal treatment of the gospel has ended, and his practical exhortations to the Romans do not commence until chapter twelve. But there is, at the same time, a crucial connectivity between chapters 9-11 and what precedes and follows. Therefore, the first responsibility is to discern that connection.

- 1) The focal point of that connection is supplied by the eighth chapter. There Paul brought his consideration of the gospel to its apex with his declaration of the absolute faithfulness of God. The God who foreknew His people has also predestined them to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that they should be made sons in the Son. This process of conformity is grounded in the Son's atonement, whereby God justified men and reconciled them to Himself. Having reconciled and adopted His children in Christ, God has given them His Spirit. He secures them in their inheritance, and is even now perfecting Christ's life and likeness in them. God's faithfulness to His own is immutable and stretches from eternity past to eternity future; those He *foreknew* He also *glorified*.
- 2) This faithfulness is set within the framework of God's covenant in Christ. God always remains faithful to His people because He is a covenant-keeping God. All of biblical revelation testifies to this overarching truth.
- 3) The Jews in the Roman church understood this well. The entire history of Israel was defined by Yahweh's covenant faithfulness to His chosen people. Though the sons of Israel continually violated God's covenant with them from the moment of its ratification at Sinai, He remained a faithful, devoted Husband (Exodus 32:1ff; Jeremiah 31:31-32). It is this historical reality that lies behind Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11. He was fully aware of the Jewish background of many of his readers, and anticipated their likely response to his insistence upon God's absolute covenant faithfulness: *If it is true that God is always faithful to His covenant people, then how does one explain His forsaking of Israel? Why is it that He abandoned His covenant with them?*
- 4) This question was not irrelevant, but Paul understood that the issue it implicates is much more significant, for it is all-encompassing. It is the issue of *promise-fulfillment* – the climax of salvation-history in Jesus Christ that was manifesting itself in the radical upheaval of the first century. For two thousand years Israel had rightly viewed itself as the seed of Abraham and God's covenant sons. Now a new reality had come in Christ and His gospel; *what did this mean for Jewish Christians and for Jewish Israel?* This was the primary issue confronting the early Church, and the one that Paul addresses here.