

ROMANS
for
EVERYONE

PART 2

CHAPTERS 9–16

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

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Acts for Everyone, Part 1

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Romans for Everyone, Part 1

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1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

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Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Hattie*

*'In all these things we are completely victorious
through the one who loved us'*

Romans 8.37

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in

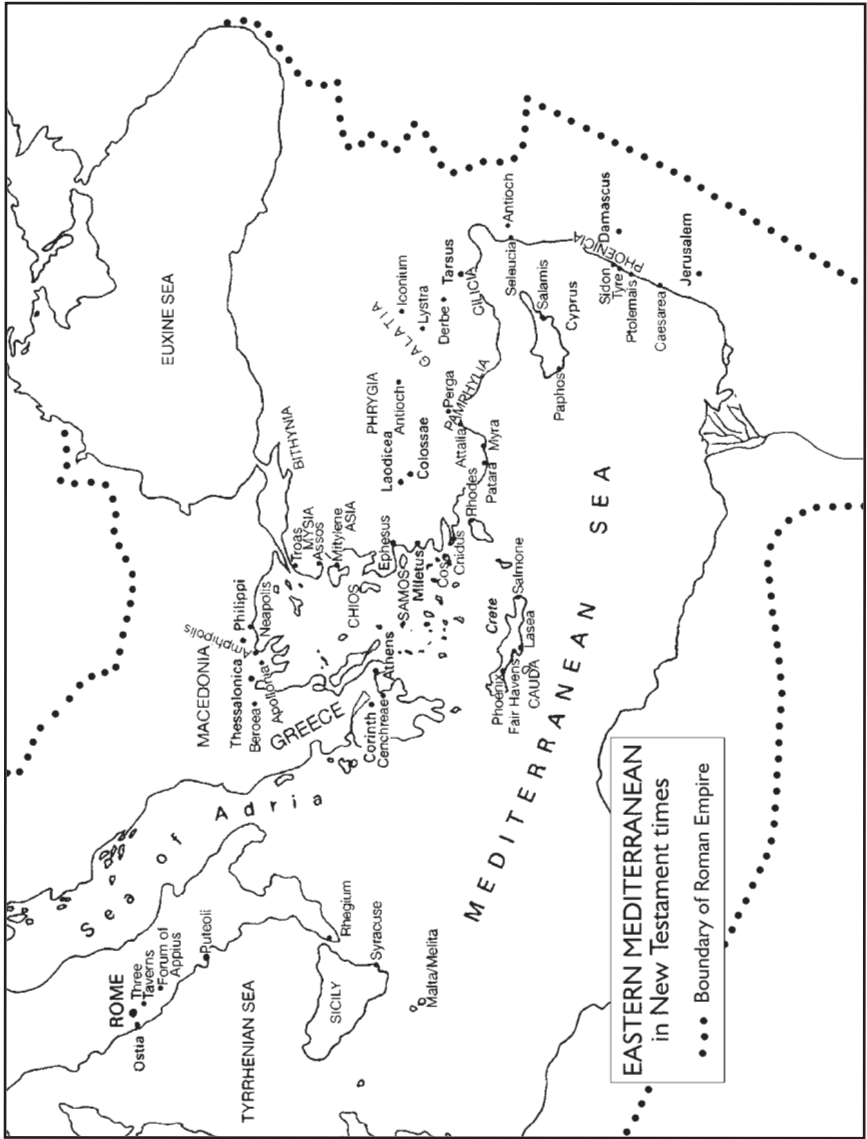
the back, of the key words that you can't really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what's going on.

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried, naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is his masterpiece. It covers many different topics from many different angles, bringing them all together into a fast-moving and compelling line of thought. Reading it sometimes feels like being swept along in a small boat on a swirling, bubbling river. We need to hold on tight if we're going to stay on board. But if we do, the energy and excitement of it all is unbeatable. The reason is obvious: because Romans is all about the God who, as Paul says, unveils his power and grace through the good news about Jesus. And, as Paul insists again and again, this power and grace is available for everyone who believes. So here it is: Romans for everyone!

Tom Wright



ROMANS 9.1–5

The Privileges and Tragedy of Israel

I'm speaking the truth in the Messiah, I'm not lying. I call my conscience as witness, in the holy spirit, ²that I have great sorrow and endless pain in my heart. ³Left to my own self, I am half inclined to pray that I would be accursed, cut off from the Messiah, on behalf of my own family, my own flesh-and-blood relatives. ⁴They are Israelites: the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises all belong to them. ⁵The patriarchs are their ancestors; and it is from them, according to the flesh, that the Messiah has come – who is God over all, blessed for ever, Amen!

This morning's newspaper carries a whole page of correspondence about an ugly fact of modern life: anti-Semitism is on the rise again. Jews have been attacked and threatened, vilified and abused in many cities in our supposedly civilized world. Old lies about the Jews, long since disproved and discredited, have been revived, published and widely circulated. And the letter-writers are asking: could this be because of people's antipathy, not to Jews as such or their Semitic origins and identity, but to the policies of the present Israeli government? This in turn generates a second level of debate, often as bitter as the first: does opposing the policy of a government mean that you are prejudiced against the nation in question? Are you prejudiced because you criticize, or do you criticize because you are prejudiced? It doesn't take much of an argument like that to make most of us throw up our hands in frustration and change the subject. Meanwhile, hatred and violence continue unchecked on their vicious spiral.

This is where we have to begin if we are going to read the next three chapters with any kind of integrity today. Please note, I do not say that we must let our present debates determine what we are prepared to let Paul say. We are here to listen to him, and ponder the meaning of what he says, not to project on to him either the views we want to hear (so that we can enjoy the echo of our own voices) or the views we don't want to hear (so that we can enjoy telling him off for his wrong-headedness). But no Christian today can ignore the fact that for many centuries anti-Semitism flourished across large areas of Christendom, and the church not only did nothing to prevent it but added fuel to the fire by declaring (for instance) that the Jews killed Jesus, despite the insistence of all four **gospels** that it was the Romans. Faced with the present passage, which speaks in every line of God's purposes for Israel, and which proposes a Christian understanding of that difficult and dangerous subject, we must pause and reflect, in sorrow and humility, on how our own **faith**

and scriptures have been abused in support of dangerous prejudices. And we must pray for wisdom to do better.

This does not mean – and we would be bound to misunderstand Romans if we thought it did mean – that Paul would support the kind of idea which has been fashionable of late, that everyone must follow their own idea of God, must find their own type of faith, and must be left to their own devices in doing so, since all faiths are of equal value. I think people are gradually coming to realize that not all beliefs are healthy and life-giving, and that not all lifestyles are equally honouring to ourselves as human beings, let alone to the God in whose image we are made. But what Paul is doing in this passage goes beyond that debate. He wants to do two things which people still have a hard time putting together. He wants to affirm, passionately, that God really did choose the Jews and equip them to be his people for the world. And he wants to affirm, equally passionately, that Jesus of Nazareth really was and is Israel's **Messiah**. Indeed, the second depends on the first: unless you believe in God's unique call to Israel, you miss the point of believing in a Messiah altogether. The Messiah comes – as Paul hints by putting him at the climax of the list of Israel's privileges in verses 4 and 5 – as the culmination of God's work, in line with all the privileges and promises of old.

That, of course, is the problem, for Paul and for us. For Paul it meant the constant mental and emotional turmoil of believing that Jesus was the promised Messiah and knowing that most of his fellow Jews rejected this belief. He was like someone driving in convoy who takes a particular turn in the road and then watches in horror as most of the other cars take the other fork. They think he's wrong; he thinks they're wrong. What is worse, he really does believe that the road he has taken is the only road to the fulfilment of God's great promises. What will happen to them? Why did they go that way, ignoring the signs that made him take the other fork? Unless we recognize that Paul thought like that, we won't understand why he is so sad or why he thinks of praying the desperate prayer he mentions in verse 3.

Sadness, indeed, is what we find here. Paul's description of his state of heart in verses 1, 2 and 3 reminds me of the sort of thing people say when they are in the depths of grief, or suffering from severe depression. When you're in that state, everything that happens, every word you hear, every sight you see, is coloured by the fact that something has gone desperately wrong. You can't forget it for a moment. Paul was a master of writing and speaking, and he knows exactly the effect this sudden outburst will produce. The end of Romans 8 was and is glorious, meant to lead us to one of the highest points of Christian celebration and reflection. But in the present life such moments are always

balanced by the sorrowful realization of the dark shadow which the bright light now casts. And that realization is meant to lead us, too, into prayer, humility, reflection and wisdom.

That reflection must begin by noticing that all the privileges Paul mentions in verses 4 and 5 are things he has already mentioned in the first eight chapters of the letter, not least in the majestic chapter that has just closed. He has declared that all who belong to the Messiah are God's adopted children. They rejoice in the hope of God's glory. The **covenant** promises have been fulfilled in the Messiah, and are now theirs by right. What the **law** could not do, God has done, and those in the Messiah now benefit from it. They are the ones who are learning the true worship, of loving God and obeying him in faith (1.5; 8.28). They inherit the promises made to the patriarchs. And they are, of course, defined as the people of the Messiah, despite the fact that most of them are not ethnically Jewish.

We have met this theme as well, of course, over and over again in the earlier chapters of Romans. People have often imagined that chapters 9–11 are a kind of bracket, an appendix, tackling a different subject from the rest of the letter. But that only shows how badly Romans as a whole has been misread. The whole letter is about the way God is fulfilling his ancient promises in and through Jesus, and what this will mean in practice. This inevitably raises the question of a proper Christian attitude towards those Jews who do not accept Jesus as Messiah. Now we begin to find – well, not an easy answer, and some would say not an 'answer' in the satisfying sense at all; rather, a way of thinking, which is rooted in a way of praying, which is rooted in love and grief. Perhaps, at the start of the twenty-first century, we can hope that Christian people will ponder these things more deeply and learn fresh wisdom.

As we do, we may just note that Paul has set a pattern, at the end of verse 5, for what is to come. The Messiah is from the Jewish people 'according to the flesh', in his flesh-and-blood identity. But he is also the Lord of all: the incarnate God who claims the allegiance of people of every race and nation. That is the point of tension, the fault line which Paul's argument will now straddle. The Jews really are the people of the Messiah, but they are that 'according to the flesh'. The Messiah really does belong to them, but only in the 'fleshly' sense; and he also belongs to the whole world as its rightful Lord. We are reminded of what Paul said at the beginning of the whole letter, in 1.3–4, and of the way that statement worked out in the following chapters. Something similar is going to happen this time as well. To ponder all this in prayer, and to refrain from rash or prejudiced judgments as we do so, is the only possible way forward for mature Christian reflection.

ROMANS 9.6–13

Abraham's Two Families

⁶But it can't be the case that God's word has failed! Not all who are from Israel, you see, are in fact Israel. ⁷Nor is it the case that all the children count as 'seed of Abraham'. No: 'in Isaac shall your seed be named'. ⁸That means that it isn't the flesh-and-blood children who are God's children; rather, it is the children of the promise who will be calculated as 'seed'. ⁹This was what the promise said, you see: 'Around this time I shall return, and Sarah shall have a son.'

¹⁰And that's not all. The same thing happened when Rebecca conceived children by one man, our ancestor Isaac. ¹¹When they had not yet been born, and had done nothing either good or bad – so that what God had in mind in making his choice might come to pass, ¹²not because of works but because of the one who calls – it was said to her, 'the elder shall serve the younger'. ¹³As the Bible says, 'I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau.'

When you walk or drive through unfamiliar territory, you have to rely on the map. It is the bottom line. If you find yourself somewhere you didn't expect, you scratch your head, get out the map again, and figure out where you went wrong. You mistook *that* turning for *this* one . . . so you took the road that went over *there* instead of over *here* . . . so no wonder you've landed up on the wrong side of the river. You'll have to go back and start again from the place where you made the mistake. It is of course possible in theory that the map might be wrong. Map-makers are fallible human beings like the rest of us. But if that's so, then you really are lost. There's nothing you can trust.

What we see in this passage and the next ones, right through to verse 29, is Paul going back to the beginning of the map and starting again. Jewish thinkers in his day often retold the story of Israel, beginning with Abraham or even with Adam, in order to explain the whole sequence of God's actions in their history up to the present day and even beyond. Paul is doing something similar. Here he tells, from one surprising angle, the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and of Ishmael and Esau as well – in order to explain what the map (God's word of promise) had in mind all along. He had misread it, he now believes, and is eager to help others who had misread it in the same way.

As far as Paul is concerned, the map, the scriptures which he believed to be God's **word**, could not be wrong. You can hold in your mind the theoretical possibility that they may have got it wrong – that God might have made a blunder, or changed his mind, or simply been unable to carry out what he had intended. But if that is so, you really are lost. There's nothing and nobody you can trust. Everything Paul

has said so far in the letter, based as it is on God's promises, would then be worthless.

Many people today, of course, would cheerfully say that if there is a God, he (or she, or it) seems to have made all kinds of blunders. The world is indeed chaotic, they say. There's no sense to it except the law of the jungle. Lots of people live on that basis. That is one reason why the world is in a mess; the theory becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But Paul is committed, and Christianity like Judaism is committed, to a different belief: that it is we who have made the blunders, and that to accuse God of them is sheer projection, like a drunkard stumbling into a ditch and accusing the road-makers of tripping him up. Or like someone holding the map upside down and then, upon arriving at a dead end, accusing the map-makers of incompetence. The question of the faithfulness and justice of the one true God – the question all thinking humans must come to sooner or later – is on the table at this point, and though we may not like what we hear there is no turning back.

What did Paul discover when he went back to the map, to the ancient stories of the patriarchs, and the promises God made to them? Just this: that from the very beginning God seems to have decided to work his strange purposes by means not only of choosing one family from the whole human race, but *by continuing that practice within the chosen family itself*. This, in fact, would have been uncontroversial among Jewish thinkers of his day, as far as the first three generations were concerned: everyone knew that God had chosen Isaac rather than Ishmael, and Jacob rather than Esau. (Paul assumes his readers know the story of the book of Genesis, in which Abraham had two sons, Isaac by his wife Sarah and Ishmael by Sarah's maid Hagar, and Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, by his wife Rebekah.) What Paul is going to suggest, though, is that the principle on which God was operating goes deeper and further than his contemporaries, and he himself, had realized.

The first point is that the practice of selection, of God working his purposes through some and not others, was intended to continue past Jacob and on into the subsequent history of Israel. It had continued, in fact, right down to the point where the **Messiah** had carried Israel's destiny all by himself. When Paul arrives at last at 10.4, the central point of the argument of these chapters, we realize that this was where the whole story had been heading. God's purpose was to act *within history* to deal with the problem of evil, but this could only be done by employing a people who were themselves part of the problem, until the time was ripe for God's own son to emerge from their midst and, all alone, to take their destiny upon himself.

The second point is that this principle of selection, of God choosing to carry forward his plan by some rather than others, was done without

regard for the moral character of the people involved. Paul perhaps has in mind at this point the regular Jewish proposal that God chose Abraham because he was a man of outstanding moral and spiritual ability, with the implication that the status of Israel as God's chosen people was similarly dependent on their being morally and spiritually superior to the rest of the human race. Paul spent quite a bit of time earlier in the letter disproving that suggestion (without suggesting for a moment that Israel's special status didn't matter). Now he returns to the point in order to tell the long, winding story of God's dealings with Israel from Abraham to his own day.

The main thing he wants to say at this stage, from the start, is that the promises God made to Abraham and Sarah, and then to Isaac and Rebekah, always envisaged this process of selection. God's promise would be carried forward by the 'seed of Abraham'. But when you examine the promises closely (Paul is quoting here from Genesis 21.12; 18.10, 14 and 25.23, throwing in Malachi 1.2–3 for good measure), it turns out that 'the seed of Abraham' was never intended to include every single physical child descended from the first patriarch. Sarah's children, not Hagar's, would count; the promise would relate to Isaac, not Ishmael.

On reading verses 6, 7 and 8, you can imagine someone saying, 'Well, that's fine; it's obviously because Sarah was Abraham's wife, whereas Hagar, Ishmael's mother, was simply a servant-girl.' But Paul won't allow that. The next generation proves the point: Esau and Jacob were twins, sharing not only the same mother, but the same single moment of conception. And yet God's purpose, announced before they were born, was that the line of promise should run through Jacob rather than Esau – a word reaffirmed roughly a thousand years later, as the prophet Malachi reflected on what had happened to the descendants of the two brothers in the subsequent centuries.

Many people feel uneasy reading these verses, and that uneasiness comes to boiling point at verse 13. Hasn't Paul managed to rescue God from the charge of incompetence, of failing to do what he promised, only to land him instead into a much worse one, of flagrant favouritism and injustice? Paul is as well aware of this question as we are, as the very next verse will show. But we should reflect, as well, on what Malachi himself meant when he said that God loved Jacob but hated Esau. There was no question that God had done remarkable things for Israel, Jacob's family, while Edom, the family of Esau, had collapsed into insignificance. But the point the prophet was making was that this now increased the responsibility, and culpability, of Israel. The thrust was not, 'You are special so you can sit back and take it easy'. It was always, 'You are special, so why are you taking God for granted, failing

to honour him, and ignoring your call to carry forward his purposes? God's choice never results in easy, arrogant, automatic superiority. Much is expected of those to whom much is given.

ROMANS 9.14–24

God's Purpose and Justice

¹⁴So what are we going to say? Is God unjust? Certainly not! ¹⁵He says to Moses, you see, 'I will have mercy on those on whom I will have mercy, and I will pity those I will pity.' ¹⁶So, then, it doesn't depend on human willing, or on human effort; it depends on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷For the Bible says to Pharaoh: 'This is why I have raised you up, to show my power in you, and so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.' ¹⁸So, then, he has mercy on the one he wants, and he hardens the one he wants.

¹⁹You will say to me, then, 'So why does he still blame people? Who can stand against his purpose?' ²⁰Are you, a mere human being, going to answer God back? 'Surely the clay won't say to the potter, "Why did you make me like this?"' ²¹Doesn't the potter have authority over the clay, so that he can make from the same lump one vessel for honour, and another for dishonour? ²²Supposing God wanted to demonstrate his anger and make known his power, and for that reason put up very patiently with the vessels of anger created for destruction, ²³in order to make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, the ones he prepared in advance for glory – ²⁴including us, whom he called not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles?

I was never much good at pottery at school. I enjoyed the feel of the clay, but it never quite did what I wanted it to. I did succeed in making one or two small dishes, including an ashtray (that dates it, because the only person I would have made that for was my father, and he gave up smoking in, I think, 1963). But I never managed the much higher art of real pottery, making mugs, jugs or vases with a potter's wheel. I remain envious of people who can do that kind of thing.

What I do remember, though, is the sign that hung on the wall of the large room at school where we did pottery and various other crafts. 'If thou hast a piece of earthenware,' it said, 'consider that it is a piece of earthenware, and as such very likely to be broken. Be not thou therefore grieved if this should come to pass.' In other words, if your best friend drops your new pot and breaks it, don't punch him on the nose.

But there are two quite different stages in pottery. The second stage, once the pot is shaped, is firing and glazing. That finishes the job, and from then on you have either a whole pot or (if somebody smashes it)

a broken one. The earlier stage, though, is quite different. The potter shapes the clay on the wheel. I've watched it done many times since those early days, and it remains one of the lovely human creative arts, with potter and clay responding to one another. Woe betide the potter who simply tries to force the clay to do things it won't do (imagine someone trying to make a square jug on a potter's wheel, for instance). But woe betide . . . well, the other half of the statement brings us back to Paul.

And to one of his most controversial statements. How can he imply that human beings are just like clay, waiting for God to mould them this way or that? Many people have become angry at this point with what they see, not as a broken pot, but a broken argument. Has Paul perhaps (to change the metaphor) painted himself into a corner?

No, he hasn't. What we often miss when we read a passage like this is the underlying story he is telling, the story that emerges when we notice the quotations in the passage and see where they are coming from. The passage about the potter and the clay is taken from Isaiah 29.16 and 45.9, with echoes of 64.8 and also of Jeremiah 18.1–6. All of these are worth looking up and reflecting on. They tell of a stage in Israel's history when God was struggling with rebellious Israel, like a potter working with clay that simply wouldn't go into the right shape. The image of potter and clay was not designed to speak in general terms about human beings as lifeless lumps of clay, over against God as the only living, thinking being; it was designed to speak very specifically about God's purpose in choosing and calling Israel, and about what would happen if Israel, like a lump of clay, failed to respond to the gentle moulding of his hands.

At that point God's purpose must go forward, whether or not Israel is obedient to its vocation. We are back once more with what Paul was talking about at the beginning of chapter 3. Indeed, the sequence of questions in our present chapter (in verses 6, 14 and 19) reflects quite closely the similar sequence in 3.1–9. We cannot simply reject this passage as though Paul is talking about God and humanity in the abstract. He is talking about God's purposes not only *with* Israel but, much more importantly, *through* Israel.

What were the purposes which God wanted to put into effect through Israel? As we have seen, the answer is that Israel was called to be the light of the world, the people through whom God would speak his **word** of promise and new creation to all the nations. But the prophets themselves saw that Israel as it stood was rebelling, like a lump of clay challenging the potter and demanding to be made into a different shape.

The point Paul is making here, indeed throughout Romans 9–11, is that this is happening at the first stage of the pottery procedure. God has not yet arrived at the moment when the clay goes in the oven and comes

out solid, so that from then on the only options are either to stay the way it is or to be smashed to pieces. Fortunately for Israel and the world, when Israel rebelled the process was still at the moulding stage. And if the pot is spoiled at that stage, of course the potter has the right (indeed, if God is the potter, he has the obligation) to rework and remould it into a new shape. What would we prefer? That he would throw the clay out and start again with entirely new clay? That question lies at the heart of the puzzle of God, the world, Israel, Jesus and the church.

The present passage, reaching its climax in this image of potter and clay, is in fact a continuation of the story which Paul started in verse 6 – the story, that is, of Israel in the Old Testament. We move from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the time of the **Exodus** from Egypt, with Moses leading the people out despite the opposition of Pharaoh. From there we come forwards into the period of the prophets, warning Israel that it was going off course from God's purpose and that, if this persisted, God would have to remould and remake Israel in a new way, not because God was forgetting his promises but precisely because he was being faithful to them.

It is this ongoing purpose, despite the fact of Israel's rebellion, that causes God to declare to Moses that he will proceed with his plan for the Exodus even though the people have made the golden calf, amounting to a declaration of independence from the true God. That is the setting for the passage in Exodus 33 which Paul quotes in verse 15. It then appears (verse 17) that God is doing with Israel itself what he did with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt who withstood God's purposes to bring Israel out of slavery. God works even within that human rebellion and arrogance to bring about an even more glorious work of rescue, revealing his power, and gaining a worldwide reputation for performing extraordinary acts of judgment and mercy. But the angle of vision is always forwards. You only understand this or that particular incident in the light of what God intends to do through it, the ultimate purposes for which God called Israel in the first place.

Where does this leave the story of Israel on the one hand, and Paul's developing argument on the other?

It brings the story of Israel up to the point where, in the historical and prophetic writings of the Old Testament, Israel goes into **exile** in order to be reshaped by God; where, in other words, the potter remoulds the clay. The Jewish scriptures themselves (this is Paul's underlying point) speak of God rightly and properly acting to take forward his eventual plan, even though this will mean reshaping Israel quite drastically. The alternative, after all, would seem to be that God would simply ignore Israel's rebellion and proceed with an automatic 'favoured-nation clause' which Paul has already firmly ruled out in chapter 2 – or that

God would scrap the plan and the promises altogether, which again is ruled out by God's own character. God will be faithful to his purpose and promise, even if all humans prove false.

Paul's developing argument has got to the point where he has established that God has the right to remould his people. He now begins to suggest that he has done so in fact, not least by calling **Gentiles** to share as full and equal members. This is a drastic and unprecedented new point within the story of Israel as normally told in Paul's world. Somehow, he now sees the torch being passed from a group consisting only of Jews (a selection from within Abraham's physical family) to a group consisting of Jews and Gentiles together. Within the argument of Romans, of course, we are used to this point. Paul has emphasized it over and over in chapters 2, 3 and 4. But within the present line of thought verse 24 is startling indeed.

Paul will develop the point in the following passages. For the moment we should simply note that the idea of a 'vessel of mercy' doesn't mean so much a vessel which receives mercy, but a vessel through which God brings mercy to others.

ROMANS 9.25–29

God Calls a Remnant

²⁵This is what he says in Hosea,

I will call 'not my people' 'my people';
and 'not beloved' I will call 'beloved'.

²⁶And in the place where it was said to them,
'You are not my people',
there they will be called 'sons of the living God'.

²⁷Isaiah cries out, concerning Israel,

Even if the number of Israel's sons are like the sand by the sea,
only a remnant shall be saved;

²⁸for the Lord will bring judgment on the earth, complete and
decisive.

²⁹As Isaiah said in an earlier passage,

If the Lord of hosts had not left us seed,
we would have become like Sodom, and been made like
Gomorrah.

The Beatles once recorded a song called 'Nowhere Man'. It grew out of a casual, dismissive remark one of them had made about somebody they'd just met: 'He's a real "nowhere man"'. It was meant as a scornful

put-down, and if the person they were referring to had ever heard it, it would have hurt. Imagine calling someone ‘Mr Nobody’, or ‘Little Miss Nobody-Loves-Me’. It’s the sort of thing children might say to each other in a malicious mood. Give someone a label which writes them off, and watch them squirm.

The prophets knew all about giving people names – and particularly about giving Israel names, names which reflected what God was thinking about them. These were not cheap put-down remarks, though; they were serious words designed to make Israel stop in its tracks and think again about what they were doing. The first two chapters of the prophet Hosea are full of this kind of thing, and Paul draws on two key promises from that passage. He quotes them in reverse order, beginning with Hosea 2.23, where the prophet declares to the Israelites that God will receive them back again after rejecting them. They were called ‘not my people’, but now they are to be called ‘my people’. They were called ‘not beloved’, but now God will call them ‘beloved’. Then he quotes the earlier passage, Hosea 1.10: in the place where you were called ‘not my people’, you will be called ‘sons of the living God’.

What is Paul saying with these (to us) somewhat obscure, though clearly dramatic, quotations? He is continuing to tell the story of Israel, the story which began with Abraham and the other patriarchs, which continued through the **Exodus**, and which now reaches the period of the prophets. Paul’s point, made here in poetic fashion, is in essence quite simple: the prophets themselves promised that God would make Israel pass through a period of judgment in order then to come out into salvation. First Israel had to hear, and bear, the name ‘not my people’, before they could again be called ‘my people’.

Paul’s point, yet once more, is that God has indeed been faithful to his promises. He has not gone back on his **word**. He said he would have to whittle Israel down to a remnant, and that’s what he has now done. To imagine that Israel could be vindicated as it stood – that all Jews would automatically be classified as true ‘children of Abraham’ – would be to ignore what Israel’s own scriptures had been saying all along. The problem of Jewish unbelief is not, then, the problem of God failing to keep his word, but the problem of Israel not hearing what that word had been saying.

The idea of a ‘remnant’, which I just mentioned, comes in the passage Paul quotes next, this time from Isaiah. To get the full flavour of this, remember that Paul is rounding off here the train of thought he began at 9.6, where he was talking about Abraham and his family, his ‘seed’, those who are ‘children of God’ (9.8) and not merely ‘children according to the flesh’. The quotation from Hosea looks back to the ‘children of God’ passage. Now the quotation from Isaiah 10.22 picks up on one of the

best-known promises to Abraham (Genesis 22.17), that his seed would be like the sand on the seashore. Well, says Isaiah, that may indeed come to pass; the number of Israel's sons according to the flesh may well grow to that size; but even if they do, only a remnant will be saved. Only some of them will find their way into God's new age, the time when mercy returns after cataclysmic judgment. Paul adds to his quotation from Isaiah 10 another one, this time from Isaiah 28.22, which insists that the **YHWH**, the Lord of hosts, will make a complete and decisive judgment on the earth. God must put the world to rights, and when he does so Israel can look for no special favours. What God will do, however, is ensure that a 'remnant' is rescued.

What is this 'remnant'? Paul is going to come back to the idea in chapter 11, but from the way it appears in other Jewish writings around this time we can say at least this. Many Jewish groups in Paul's day took it for granted that, when God finally acted to judge and save, by no means all ethnic Jews would be among those rescued. Many had rebelled against God and his word, and had appeared to want no part in his salvation. Devout Jews, observing this, picked up on these promises and declared that God was cutting Israel down to size, pruning his people quite drastically. Sometimes (as in the **Dead Sea Scrolls**) people thought of this in terms of a small minority who were somehow spared the judgment. Paul sees it, rather, as those who are brought through the judgment and out the other side. That will be the foundation of the fresh story he will tell in chapter 11, of how the present 'remnant' of believing Jews can be increased.

The final quotation from Isaiah (1.9) points in the same direction, and once more ties in to the Abraham story. Sodom and Gomorrah were the cities of the plain, now buried beneath the Dead Sea. They were destroyed in a great act of judgment, while Abraham, whose nephew Lot had gone to live in Sodom, looked on from a distance (Genesis 19.27–28). Isaiah looks back to this story and declares that if God hadn't left them a remnant, Israel as a whole, Abraham's own family, would have gone the same way. Paul actually changes the word 'remnant', used by Isaiah here, to 'seed', in order to tie it in to the discussion of 9.7–8.

The passage is thus complex and dense, but its general drift is clear. Paul is rounding off what we might call 'Israel's story so far' by quoting Old Testament prophets to show that what has now happened, with most Jews remaining outside God's renewed people and only a remnant inside it, is exactly what God had said would happen. He has made his main point: God's word has not failed. On the contrary, it has come all too uncomfortably true. And the second question he has to deal with, whether God is just or unjust, has been addressed in the process: God has had to deal with Israel, not as a blank slate, but as a

rebellious people deserving of judgment. When that judgment falls, Israel has no reason to complain. In fact, God has been merciful in rescuing a remnant, despite universal sinfulness.

In the course of this long argument (9.6–29), Paul has said a great many things which we need to ponder carefully. In particular, we must remember that he is discussing ethnic Israel as the people of the **Messiah**, albeit ‘according to the flesh’. What he says in this passage belongs closely with several earlier parts of the letter, two in particular.

First, in chapter 3 he explains how God must go ahead with his promised plan even if Israel proves unfaithful. The way God will do this is by sending Jesus as the faithful Israelite, the Messiah through whose death and **resurrection** God will fulfil his saving purpose. Second, in chapter 7 he describes how, through the **law**, sin gathered itself to its full height within Israel, in order that, through the death of the Messiah, sin could finally be condemned as it deserved.

These two passages, taken together, point in the direction of chapter 9. Here, Israel finds itself called to a particular, and very strange, role in God’s purposes – that of being apparently cast away in order that God’s powerful plan of salvation can go forwards. Paul never spells this theme out more fully. But it seems as though he is looking at his fellow Jews – at himself, indeed – as people called, whether or not they understand or co-operate, to be part of the saving plan which reaches its climax in the ‘casting away’ of the Messiah himself on the cross. His apparently harsh words are to be understood in the light of the even harsher reality of what happened to Jesus. This will enable him, in what now follows, to explain his continuing desire that more Jews should in fact find God’s way of salvation.

ROMANS 9.30—10.4

Israel, the Nations and the Messiah

³⁰What then shall we say? That the nations, who were not aspiring towards covenant membership, have obtained covenant membership, but it is a covenant membership based on faith. ³¹Israel meanwhile, though eager for the law which defined the covenant, did not attain to the law. ³²Why not? Because they did not pursue it on the basis of faith, but as though it was on the basis of works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³as the Bible says,

Look: I am placing in Zion
a stone that will make people stumble,
a rock that will trip people up;
and the one who believes in him
will never be put to shame.

^{10.1}My dear family, the longing of my heart, and my prayer to God on their behalf, is for their salvation. ²I can testify on their behalf that they have a zeal for God; but it is not based on knowledge. ³They were ignorant, you see, of God's covenant faithfulness, and they were trying to establish a covenant status of their own; so they didn't submit to God's faithfulness. ⁴The Messiah, you see, is the goal of the law, so that covenant membership may be available for all who believe.

One of the things I have to do in my job is to encourage people who are building new churches or other premises for worship, outreach, child care and so on. Often this involves being there when the first bit of the building is done, to pray over the foundation stone and ask God to bless both the building itself and all the work that will go on within it.

Usually what's called the 'foundation stone' isn't actually part of the foundation itself. If it was, nobody would be able to see it, because it would be some way underground. So another stone, a little way above ground, is designated as the 'foundation stone', often with an inscription to say that the building was dedicated on such-and-such a date, and so on.

But supposing the foundation stone was placed right at ground level, so that it was literally the visible base of the coming building. And supposing that it was standing there, after the ceremony but before any more of the building had gone up. And supposing someone walking past at the dead of night didn't notice it was there. The stone that had been intended as the foundation of a building would trip them up.

It's an odd picture, but it's more or less exactly what Paul has in mind in 9.33. He is bringing together two passages in Isaiah, both about a 'stone' which God will place on the ground.

In Isaiah 28.16 the stone is the foundation of the new **Temple** that's yet to be built. It looks, in the passage, as though what the prophet has in mind is actually the coming King who will be the human foundation for the great community focused on the Temple. In Isaiah 8.14, however, the prophet declares to God's rebellious people that God will place in front of them a stone that people will stumble over or trip up on. This is part of the judgment that will fall. Even when God does something good, even when he provides for his people, those who are bent on rebellion will find it a trap.

But in Isaiah 28, the prophet ends with a promise which Paul applies to both ideas together: anyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. The words Paul uses could mean 'in it' rather than, or perhaps as well as, 'in him', but it comes to the same thing. The 'stone' in both passages seems to refer to the coming King, and certainly that is how Paul wants us to read it.

By bringing these two passages together, Paul has cleverly used a combined biblical text to say that now, once more in fulfilment of scripture rather than as a change of plan on God's part, the foundation of God's new 'building' has been laid – but that those who don't believe in him, in the **Messiah** who is the foundation, will trip over this 'stone' and fall flat on their faces. He is still explaining how it is that Israel's substantial failure to believe in Jesus as Messiah, either during Jesus' public career or during the present time of missionary work, does not represent a thwarting of God's plan or a change of God's mind, but rather an unexpected fulfilment, albeit comprehensible only with hindsight, of what God had planned all along.

This double quotation from Isaiah stands at the middle of the present passage, which is itself more or less central to the whole of chapters 9—11. We are here at the heart of Paul's argument: like a guide on a walk, he is explaining where the journey has now got to. Having followed through the story of Abraham and Israel (9.6–29), we have arrived at the point where we can see what's been going on. **Gentiles** have been coming into the **covenant** family God promised to Abraham, while a good many Jews have been going about things the wrong way and so have failed to have the **faith** which alone marks out the members of that true family.

This discussion relates closely to two previous passages in the letter, both of which should be in mind at this point. In 3.21—4.25 Paul spelled out the way in which Abraham's true family consists of all those, Jew and Gentile alike, who believe in the **gospel** of Jesus and so share Abraham's faith, the one and only badge of family membership. This, Paul explained, was the revelation, or the unveiling, of God's own covenant faithfulness, God's justice, the divine plan to put the world to rights. Then, in 7.1—8.11, Paul explains how the **law** actually lured Israel into a deliberate trap, becoming the place where sin increased to its full height, in order that the Messiah, representing Israel, could take the weight of that sin on to himself and, in his death, become the place where it was condemned once and for all.

Paul is now drawing on these previous passages in order to say, within the flow of thought of chapters 9, 10 and 11, that the story of God and Israel has reached its climax with the coming, and the death and **resurrection**, of the Messiah. This then explains the extraordinary fact that Gentiles, nations which had not been called by the creator God, have been flooding into the covenant family, while Jews, the physical family of Abraham, have in effect turned their backs on it because the means they were using to consolidate their membership were counterproductive.

Here we meet a problem we noted earlier in the letter. One of the key technical terms in this letter is the word I've translated 'covenant

membership' in 9.30, 'covenant faithfulness' in its first occurrence in 10.3, 'covenant status' in its second occurrence in that verse, 'faithfulness' on its third occurrence, and then 'covenant membership' again in 10.4. Why on earth would a translator do something like that?

The problem is that the word, often translated 'righteousness', and sometimes 'uprightness' or 'justice', really does mean all of those things and more. Paul is exploiting it, in a way that's very hard to do in English, to get to the heart of what he wants to say, which centres on the following three things.

First, God really has been faithful to the covenant. What has happened – specifically, the coming of the Messiah, and the reaction to him from Jews and Gentiles – is what God had in mind all along, even though Israel hadn't understood this. This misunderstanding was itself, it appears, actually part of the plan.

Second, membership in God's covenant family, that is, membership in the people God promised to Abraham, is marked out by faith alone, not works of the Jewish law. This is why Gentiles who believe the gospel are counted as full members.

Third, Paul's fellow Jews were doing their best (as he himself had done prior to his conversion) to use the law as a badge of covenant membership. They were relying on their performance of its commands to demonstrate that they were the true children of Abraham. But the law was never meant to work that way. That's why they have tripped over the 'stone', the Messiah who is the foundation of the true family. That's why, too, they have remained ignorant of God's covenant purposes, and the fact that he had been faithful to his promises when he sent Jesus as the Messiah (10.3, 4). 'The Messiah is the goal of the Law': this is where God's strange purposes had been heading all along.

This is one of the crucial moments in all of Paul's writing. If we get our heads round it we will understand a good many other things too. But we shouldn't miss, in the middle of Paul's visionary glimpse of how God's purposes had reached their climax, his deeply personal prayer, echoing what he had said at the start of chapter 9. The longing of his heart, and his prayer to God for his fellow Jews, is that they might be saved (10.1). Much of the rest of the section, to the end of chapter 11, is devoted to explaining how that might now come about.

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