Romans 9:1–13

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen. Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.*

The Setting of Romans 9–11

The great no-difference doctrine of Romans 1–8 — that Jew and Gentile stand alike before God, both under sin, both justified the same way — could raise a serious difficulty in a Jewish mind. Has God then abandoned the promises He made to Israel? Has His word taken none effect? Romans 9 through 11 answer that question, showing that God's past ways with Israel, His present governmental dealings, and Israel's coming national blessing are all in complete harmony with the gospel laid out in the first eight chapters. At the close of chapter 11, the same principle appears: God has concluded all in unbelief that He might have mercy upon all. No difference — in either direction.

Paul's Sorrow — A Measured Assessment

Paul begins by giving assurance that what follows is not polemic but a measured, Spirit-witnessed statement. *I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.* The reason for this assurance is the weight of what he is about to say. He had great heaviness — uninterrupted pain — carried with him concerning the national setting aside of Israel. The passing expression in verse 3 — I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren's sake — echoes Moses in Exodus 32: blot me out of thy book rather than destroy them. Both were passing expressions of grief, not settled positions. The settled reality for Paul was not that wish but the uninterrupted pain of carrying a broken heart for his nation.

Two Dispensational Markers — The Mystery and the Covenants

Verses 4-5 contain two great scriptural anchors for dispensational truth. The first is the secrecy of the mystery: three texts establish it as a threefold cord — Romans 16:25-26, Colossians 1:26, and Ephesians 3:5, 9 — each giving a different aspect: silence was kept concerning it, it was hidden from ages and from generations, and in Ephesians 3 we learn where it was hidden — in God. Not hidden in the Old Testament; hidden in God. Once a person bows to those three scriptures, he is oriented toward the dispensational understanding of the word of God.

The second anchor is here in verse 4: *whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises.* These seven things belong to Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh. Not one Gentile is Paul's kinsman according to the flesh. The covenants especially — the four covenants of promise: Abrahamic, the everlasting priesthood with Phinehas, the Davidic, and the new covenant — belong to Israel.

Ephesians 2 confirms it from the other side: we are *strangers from the covenants of promise.* No one who bows to both of these markers can hold that the church is the spiritual Israel or that the church is under the new covenant.

The Eighth Thing — Christ Came of Them

Seven lovely things are summed up as belonging to Paul's kinsmen. Then comes an eighth, with a significant change of wording: *of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever.* The seven are said to pertain to them, to belong to them. This one is different — He came of them, but He is not theirs alone. He belongs to every saved Gentile too. The crowning wonder added to all those seven blessings is that the one they put to death is the very one who will make all those seven things good. He is over all, God blessed for ever.

Natural Descent Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

Verses 6-13 demonstrate that natural descent from Abraham is necessary for Israel's national blessing but not sufficient to gain it individually. The word of God has not failed, Paul says — because not all who are of Israel are Israel. There is an Israel within Israel. God set aside Ishmael, though he was Abraham's natural son. He set aside Esau, though both Esau and Jacob had the same mother, the same father, and neither had yet done good or evil when God's choice was announced. That is: the purpose of God according to election stands not of works but of Him that calls.

The hardening of Pharaoh and the principle of Esau I hated are not eternal decrees of reprobation laid down before birth. Pharaoh hardened his own heart four times before God hardened it. The divine declaration about Esau came in Malachi, centuries after their characters had manifested themselves. What is established here is God's sovereign freedom: *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy*. He acts from His own will, not from man's will or effort or running.

And the vessels of mercy are said to have been prepared by God for glory; the vessels of wrath are not said to be prepared by God for wrath but are said to be fitted for it — and over them God is said to have endured with much longsuffering. The asymmetry in the language is careful and deliberate.

— Study ends —