

Chapter 9

If you've been following up to here, then you'll be able to see that my argument creates a serious question. I've always been a proud Jew, with a passion for my heritage and for the traditions of my people. And now I faced a huge quandary. Up till this point I'd been arguing that the Instruction doesn't have the role in God's purposes that I used to think that it had. Was the same true for Israel, the people who are defined by their possession of that Instruction? If Jews and Gentiles were in the same boat and could attain Life in the same way – through King Jesus – then how did Israel fit into God's plans for the future?

Verses 1–5 My concern for the Jewish people

In this section I express my sadness at the present spiritual condition of most of my own people and outline some of the great privileges they have. The key spiritual issue was that most of them refused to recognise that God had sent Jesus of Nazareth as King and Saviour. As a result, they were missing out on the Life God was offering through him.

1. I knew I was going to have to speak about this from the heart. But it wasn't just me. I knew that my thoughts and feelings came from God's Spirit.
2. If the truth be told, I was really devastated about all of this.
3. I wished – I still wish – I could get my fellow Jews to understand how God has acted. Indeed, there's part of me that thinks that I would rather find myself cursed by God and cut off from King Jesus, if it would help open their eyes to what has happened. For I belong to these people. As far as lines of descent are concerned, these are my family, my brothers and my sisters.
4. After all, they are Israelites. They have all kinds of privileges. They are the sons and daughters of God. The glory of God has been in their midst. God made pacts with them. He gave them the Instruction, the worship in the tabernacle and the temple. God has made them promises.
5. The list goes on. All the great promises that I've talked about in this letter were given to the ancestors of the Jewish people. And as far as lines of descent are concerned, God's true King is theirs – King Jesus himself is Jewish. Let's face it, King Jesus is their King before he's anyone else's. And he's in charge of everything. He's God and is to be blessed forever.

Given all that he had given to Israel in the past, I couldn't for the life of me understand why God had not helped them to see all that he's done through King Jesus. I'd thought about this long and hard for a long time, and I'd reached the conclusions which are set out over the next three chapters. Please remember that these were written without the benefit of the hindsight we all now enjoy. I think the words still speak the truth but it's important to remember that they were written before the church became an institution led mainly by non-Jews with a history of prejudice against the Jewish people, and before the adherents of Christianity and Judaism started to see themselves as belonging to two separate religious systems.

Verses 6–18 Two ways of being Israel

In this section I explore what all this might mean. Has God changed? Or changed his mind? How does this all fit into the story of Israel as it is told in the scriptures? You have already seen my tendency to see things as twofold. We saw this in terms of the Instruction. And we saw it in terms of Israel seeking to live under the Instruction. Well, we'll now see how it works out in Israel's story. Israel exists in two different forms, one physical and one spiritual. The two overlap one another but are distinct.

6. First of all, I needed to be completely clear; the word of God has been fulfilled. It's always been this way whenever God has acted. There's always been two ways of looking at the nation we call Israel. One is in terms of physical descent and the other in terms of the spiritual promise. There's always been the physical version where you measure things by their family line which we might call 'Israel by descent'. But there's also been a spiritual version where you measure things differently. We'll call this 'Israel of promise'. The key thing to grasp at this stage of the argument is that not all those who are recognised as being a part of Israel by descent are necessarily a part of Israel according to the promise. Physical and spiritual Israel overlap with each other but are not identical.

7. I still think the easiest way to explain this is to go back to the beginning of the story and tell you the story of the descendants of Abraham. He had loads of physical children. However, the scriptures make it clear that his true, spiritual descendants are the ones who came through Isaac – or some of them. The physical descent was one thing, but the line of promise was related to it but different from it. When it comes to the things that God has guaranteed, it's the line of promise that counts.

8. Let me stress, this means that it is not simply the question of physical descent that matters. The ones who count as the sons and daughters of God, the ones who inherit the promises, these are the true descendants. If you remember, I argued something very similar to this in chapter 4.

9. I thought I should probably remind the readers of what the promise to Abraham actually said. It was that Abraham's wife Sarah would have a son. Abraham had a concubine and he had other wives. Through them he had lots of children. But the true descendant was Sarah's son, Isaac. The promises were inherited by him.

10. And it doesn't stop there. If you continue with the story, the pattern repeats itself. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had children. Let me remind you what happened to them.

11. There were two boys, Esau and Jacob. And the line of promise was announced before they were born. It was declared before the boys had an opportunity to do anything or to reveal their characters. In one sense, the story's not about them it's about God. The story is about God's line of promise.

12. The promise is not something that was earned or deserved. It was a matter of God's purposes. That's why Rebekah was told, before those twin boys were born, that the first born would end up serving the second born.

13. Just to rub the point home, I reminded the Romans of another text that helps make the point. It's from the prophet Malachi. Part of my reason for quoting this was so that you can see that it's not just me making this kind of argument. The prophetic books in the scriptures also understand this. There's

a little bit of hyperbole in the words to help generate the intended effect; God loved Jacob and hated Esau.

14. Needless to say, I can see that some people will choose to argue the toss about whether this is fair or not. I have to say, I think they're missing the point.

15. After all, this is all a matter for God. It doesn't depend on us but on him. Everyone is on a path to Death. That's the point I was making in the first part of the letter. However, God chooses to be merciful to some.

16. You can see that the story shows that inheriting the promise was never a matter of human will or effort. It was never something earned or deserved. It was simply a question of on whom God decided to show mercy. This is the heart of the argument and if you follow closely, you will see that I pick up the idea of God's mercy as part of the conclusion at the end of chapter 11.

17. There are lots of examples of this in the story of Israel. Here's another. This time it's about the Egyptian King at the time of the Exodus. He is told that the purpose of his rise to such a great position was so that God's power could be shown and so that God's name might become famous. This underlines the point I am making that the story of Israel is really God's story.

18. Let me conclude this part of the argument by underlining the point I've made. The story is all about God. God decides who will receive mercy. God decides who will close their heart towards him.

The thing to remember is that the issue remains the place of Israel in God's purposes. At this stage in my argument, I was retelling the story of Israel to make it clear that true, spiritual Israel is related to, but is not the same entity as, Israel by physical descent. The promises belong to the former, which is one part of the latter.

There are other things I could have pointed out though they might have muddied the water. In the story of Israel there are a number of people who are clearly a part of spiritual Israel even though they are not Israelites by descent. They expressed faith in the true God but were not born into one of the tribes of Israel. The most obvious examples are Rahab and Ruth. Both, according to tradition, were ancestors of King David and of King Jesus.¹

Verses 19–24 Is God just?

At this point I got drawn into a discussion with the team about whether all this was fair or not. I decided to include in the letter some of the points that were made. It's a bit of a digression from the main theme but we'll go back to that before too long.

19. Now, you might argue that this is hardly fair since none of us can resist God's will. What chance has any one of us got?

¹ Matthew 1:5.

20. But we must remember that this is the creator we're talking about. Do we really think we know better than God? That would be like a lump of clay saying to the potter, 'You don't want to make me into this! You ought to make me into something better than that!'

21. Think about a potter who has had a batch of clay delivered. From the same batch he makes a range of different things. It's not the clay that's different, it's the plans of the potter.

22. Now, to get back to our courtroom image for a moment, God can be thought of like a judge who is motivated to exercise judgement. Suppose this judge has been very tolerant and put up with all sorts of nonsense for a very long time. That's like the clay bins that are made to be thrown away.

23. Might it not be that he's done this in order to offer his glory, the eventual goal of all creation, to those on whom God has chosen to be merciful, those he has shaped to share that glory?

24. And this group could include all of us whom God has called, that is those who follow Jesus whether we are Jews or non-Jews.

I confess that there were times when I used to think of this as a knockdown argument and there were other times when I had niggling doubts about it. Things are a bit clearer from where I sit in the cloud of witnesses. I thought about trying to explain it all at this point but found that there wasn't a way I could put it into words. My argument gets to some of the truth of what was going on but not to quite all of it. You will notice that I've introduced the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples, into the story of Israel at this point. In the next section, I'm going to defend this move by reminding you of the teaching of some of the prophets.

Verses 25–29 God promised that non-Jews would be part of his people

I'd made the point that there is a distinction between Israel by descent and Israel according to the promise. This is God's doing. I'd also hinted that the non-Jews may have a part in all this. Now I go back to the telling of the story of the people of God. I pointed out that the idea that the people of God might extend beyond physical Israel is not some new idea that I'd invented but something promised in the scriptures by the prophets. I understand these prophecies as restatements of the foundational promise to humanity and the promises to Abraham about all the nations being blessed. Non-Jews too can inherit the promises of God.

25. Let's look at the prophet Hosea. He makes it perfectly clear that God always intended that some of those who were not his people, that is non-Jews, should become part of his people. God would love those to whom God had not previously shown love.

26. This underlines the point. Those who were once not the people of God will be called God's children. This makes it clear that there will be non-Jews who will inherit the promises.

27. You get something very similar in the prophet Isaiah. Firstly, he makes it clear that though Israel by descent might be a vast number, only a portion of them would inherit the promise of salvation. That fits in completely with the argument I have been making – physical Israel and spiritual Israel are related – but separate – entities.

28. Then, the rest of the quotation makes it clear that when God chooses to act, it will be decisive.

29. There's now a further text from Isaiah which I take to refer to the same decisive action. Only a few physical Israelites are left within Israel, that is within true, spiritual Israel, the part that inherits the promises. It is only an act of God's mercy that there are any at all in this category. If these had not remained the loss would have been like the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I read these prophecies as having come to pass in the proclamation of the gospel of King Jesus. The non-Jews who were becoming followers of Jesus were those who had once not been part of the people of God, but now were. They had become a part of spiritual Israel. In addition, the promised judgement on Israel that, however numerous they might be, only a small group would be saved, hence part of the spiritual people of God, had happened. You could see it in the way different groups are responding to the proclamation of the gospel. Part of me was very upset by what was happening, but I could see that it was prophesied. As always, God was doing what he had said he would.

Verses 30–33 Why was this happening?

So, just what is going on and how shall we begin to explain these things? How had non-Jews found their way into the people of God while physical Israel had been left out in the cold? These are the questions I explored here and in the opening verses of the next chapter.

30. I was looking for another way to put this. Non-Jews who had no clue about God's promises had inherited them. They had not been seeking to live in the way that God had always intended but they had found themselves treated as though they were doing just that, and then had started doing it, all because of their trust in King Jesus.

31. Meanwhile, Israel thought that the promises would come through the Instruction, and so failed to understand the point of the Instruction. Israel behaved as though outward obedience to the Instruction would enable them to live in the way that God always intended. It didn't happen. They failed to fulfil the true purpose of the Instruction.

32. What went wrong? Well, this happened because they thought it was an outward rather than an inward thing. They tried to do it as though what really mattered were the external badges found in the Instruction, and not what goes on in the inner being. As a result, when the solution was offered, they stumbled over it rather than embracing it.

33. Once again, I need to stress that I wasn't making any of this up. It was exactly what the scriptures said would happen. I quote a text that I understand in terms of King Jesus and the proclamation about him. King Jesus is what God had placed within Israel and, as a result, physical Israel had been revealed for what it is. This is the moment of which Isaiah spoke. Israel by descent is shown to be, at least most of them, outside of the line of promise. On the other hand, those who do trust in King Jesus are not shamed, that is are shown to be those who will be vindicated at the final judgement, which is another way of saying that they are those who inherit the promises of God.

To sum up the argument, there have always been two ways of being Israel. The Israel that really matters is spiritual Israel. This is the part that will inherit God's promises. In addition, God had promised that the nations would be blessed, and that non-Jews would become a part of the people of God. As the message about King Jesus was proclaimed, you could see these prophecies being fulfilled. Furthermore, there was a significant prophecy in Isaiah that suggested that, when God intervened to keep his promises, Israel would stumble. This must be what was happening. The question I had to wrestle with was whether the stumbling was final or just a temporary setback. This is an issue that I address in chapter 11 but before that I need to say something more about how Israel came to stumble and the impact that this has had.