Understanding What the Bible Says about Election

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Introduction

One of the theological issues most often debated among Christians is the issue of “election.” The term election, when used in a theological sense, essentially means God’s right to choose. The question theologians debate is how much of our salvation and our lives is up to God’s choosing and how much is ultimately up to our “free will” meaning our ability to choose. This theological debate tends to be focused on what is commonly referred to as “predestination” which is the theological idea that those who are saved or “elect” or those whom God has chosen to save before they were born without any regard to who they are. The opposing view is that God does not choose who should be saved or “elect” but instead wills that everyone would be saved but only those who respond, of their own free will, to God’s offer of salvation through Jesus are saved. Those who argue for predestination emphasize the fact that we cannot save ourselves and we need God to reveal the gospel to us. Those who argue against predestination emphasize the need of our response to God.

In this series we will not address the issue of predestination – whether God essentially chooses to save some and then chooses to not save others - but will look at the broader concept of election. This is important subject because election plays a significant role in the redemptive story and yet the role that it plays is often missed because we reduce the conversation to the subject of predestination unto salvation. In doing so, we miss something very valuable.

Perhaps the key passage with regard to election in the New Testament is Romans 9. Many theologians use this passage as a primary text for the subject of predestination, but it is important to see that Paul’s primary subject in this passage is not the question of how individuals are saved but rather the role election plays in God’s redemptive plan.

Paul’s discussion about election in the passage has serious implications and it is important for us to understand it. In this passage, Paul describes the issue of election with regard to God’s election of Israel. The issue of Israel’s election is incredibly important to because it helps us to understand God’s redemptive plan. God’s election of Israel is something that remains controversial to this day and will grow increasingly controversial in the future. God’s election of Israel also reveals God’s way of relating to His people and therefore applies to many other situations we encounter in life. As we look at how God is bringing Israel’s calling to pass through election, we can better understand how He will bring all His purposes to pass.
The Issue of Election

To understand Israel’s present and future calling, we must first understand the word *elect* and the biblical concept of election. In the New Testament, believers are referred to as the “elect” of God. To say that someone is “elect” is to say he or she is chosen. Those who believe in Jesus are described as the “chosen” of God. This concept in the New Testament is drawn from the language of the Old Testament where Israel, as the covenant people of God, is described as the chosen people. As we discussed in Chapter 2, a dramatic transition has taken place in the New Testament, and the people of God are now defined as those in right relationship with God through Jesus.

Those are the “chosen” of God because they belong to Him. So, in this sense, all believers are elect. Because of this, over time, the concept of election has become synonymous with the concept of salvation. In other words, those who are elect are those being saved and those who are not elect are not being saved. In reality, the term *election* in the New Testament is broader than the issue of whether or not an individual is being saved. In the New Testament, it is possible to be “elect” and yet not saved. It is also possible to not be born “elect” and then become part of the elect in salvation. Election, then, is not a one-dimensional term used only to refer to salvation. This is important for us to recognize so that we can correctly understand Israel’s present and Israel’s future.

In this section, we will focus primarily on Israel’s election and not the election of individuals unto individual salvation. The point of this chapter is not to wrestle with the Calvinist and Arminianism views of individual salvation. The point of this chapter is not that God does not elect individuals to salvation in a divine way, but simply to address the concept of election in the New Testament in its broader sense and specifically how it applies to the election of Israel. If we do not recognize that, we cannot see Israel’s position clearly nor interpret Paul’s statements on the subject correctly.

To look at how Paul applies the concept of election to Israel, we have to recognize that we often have a one dimensional view of the concept of election, applying it only to individual salvation, and that can keep us from understanding what Paul says about Israel’s position as an elect people group and an elect nation. We will see that, according to Paul, there can be individuals who are “elect” and yet not saved, and understanding this is what makes sense of Israel’s past, present, and future. To do this, we have to look carefully at what Paul said about Israel’s election in Romans 9 through 11.

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Paul’s Dilemma

In Romans 9, Paul wrestles with a controversy he constantly faced as he traveled in a mostly gentile context and preached that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and the King of the nations. Because the church has been predominantly gentile for so many centuries, it is difficult for us to imagine how controversial Paul’s message was. Paul was declaring that Israel’s King had arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, Paul declared that, not only Jews, but the gentiles also must submit to that King because Jesus was more than Israel’s Savior and King. He was the Savior and King of the world. That message alone was incredibly controversial, but Paul had to wrestle with an additional controversy: most of the Jews in Paul’s time rejected Jesus as Israel’s King. In other words, Paul was calling the gentiles to submit to a Jewish King that many of the Jews had rejected. It is hard for us to imagine just how controversial this was for Paul as he labored among the gentiles. Everywhere he went, Paul had to wrestle with a dilemma: if Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, why is most of Israel rejecting Him?

Romans 9 through 11 is Paul’s answer to the question of how Jesus could be the King of Israel if Israel was rejecting Him as King. Paul teaches two key principles we need to understand as we look at these chapters:

- Such rejection has happened before in Israel’s history. Throughout Israel’s history, when God elects an individual, others respond negatively to that election and end up cut off from the position they should have in the people of God.

- Israel remains elect even if she is in unbelief and cut off from the people of God. Paul affirms the promises of the prophets remain. Israel’s rejection of Messiah is actually part of a process that will end with her being brought back into the people of God and receiving all the promised benefits of her election.

Paul begins Romans 9 with critical examples from the life of Israel to detail how God’s process of election has affected her history. The key question we must ask in this chapter is: are the examples Paul gives us intended to primarily teach that some are elected for salvation and others for damnation, or is Paul illustrating a different aspect of election? As we look at the chapter, we will see that Paul does not focus on the subject of election unto salvation. Paul focuses on the election of specific individuals to a redemptive function and on the results of that election both for the one elected and for those who are not elect. Again, the primarily point of these verses is not predestination to salvation, but rather predestination to redemptive purpose.

This is not to say that God cannot or does not elect unto salvation, but simply to say that this it is not the primary focus of the chapter. We have to recognize this so that we do not miss the primary point Paul is making. Paul is following the Old Testament, and

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throughout Israel’s history, the election of Israel is primarily focused on its redemptive purpose rather than on individual salvation. For example, throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are referred to as the “chosen” or elect people, and at the same time the Scripture tells the tragic story of Israel’s sin. The prophets warn the elect people that the way they are living is causing them to lose the benefits of their election. Israel is chosen and yet suffers judgment because of sin; however, in her sin, the nation remains elect.

In the Old Testament, Israel’s election is not equivalent to her salvation. The New Testament adds some complexity to that because it refers to believers, both Jew and gentile, as the elect of God. That can lead to the idea that elect in the New Testament is now applied to all who are being saved. In reality, though, the term continues to be used the way it was in the Old Testament. Gentiles are the elect now because they have been brought into the people of God, the “chosen” people, through the work of Jesus. This is the clear message of Ephesians 2. At the same time, Israel remains elect because of her unique redemptive calling. On one hand, Paul can call the gentiles “elect” because they are part of the people of God; on the other hand, he calls Israel “elect” even when she is broken off from God’s people, because God has a redemptive purpose for Israel that He will not forfeit. We have to understand this Old Testament concept of the election of God in order to understand what is being said in the New Testament. Gentiles are made part of the chosen people of God, and yet Israel’s unique calling is never replaced or abrogated.

The debate over whether and how believers are predestined to salvation is centuries old, and we cannot settle it in this chapter. In this chapter, we are not saying God cannot elect individuals to salvation or His pattern in dealing with Israel’s redemptive purpose shouldn’t affect how we view individual salvation. Individual salvation, or soteriology, is not the purpose of our discussion. Our purpose is to understand the purpose of God’s election, particularly His election of Israel, knowing that a wrong response to His election can cause individuals to be cut off from Him and nations to be subject to His judgment and wrath.

In Romans 9, Paul gives three critical moments in Israel’s history. At each time, God elects an individual for a specific redemptive purpose. In each case, Paul highlights the individuals who rejected God’s election and, as a result of that rejection, were actually cut off from the people of God. In each of these situations, the one who was not elect was also positioned to receive covenant blessing and could have received a blessing by submitting to God’s election, but instead he lost everything by his refusal to do so. This has two very sober lessons for Paul’s listeners, one for Jewish individuals and a second for the Jewish people as a whole.

The first lesson is that individual Jews, though they are born into the elect people, can actually be cut off from the covenant promises through offense at the One God has

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chosen. In this case, it is the offense of Israel at the man Jesus. God chose Jesus, and most of Israel did not agree with His choice. Her disagreement with God’s choice actually causes her to be cut off from the people of God even though she was born to receive all the benefits of the covenant. The second lesson is that the one whom God elects is not always the choice we would agree with. God elects “Jacob” before he is “Israel.” Because God does not choose individuals for a redemptive purpose based on their own righteousness, God elects the unqualified and His election remains even when those He has chosen sin. The application for Paul’s audience is that Israel’s election as a people group remains because it is based on God’s choice and not their righteousness. On an individual level, there is a great tragedy in that many Jewish individuals are cut off from their God. On a corporate level, the faithfulness of God remains, and He will bring Israel into the promises of her election.

The fact that Paul focuses in on reelection to a redemptive purpose does not make this chapter any less serious. Paul soberly reminds his readers in this chapter that God’s election of people and nations for redemptive purposes can also cause offense in the hearts of others, and if this offense is not dealt with, it actually can cause individuals to lose their salvation. In each case Paul gives, we will see that offense at God’s election actually cost people participation in His covenant purposes. It’s a grave reminder of the consequences of resisting God’s election. Paul highlights the consequences Israel has suffered in resisting God’s election of Jesus, but he will also highlight the consequences the gentiles face if they resist God’s election of Israel. We will look at both of these more closely when we examine Paul’s key phrase about the “purpose of election” in Romans 9:11.

**Paul’s Affirmation of God’s Election**

Paul opens Romans 9 by expressing unparalleled emotion for the salvation of Israel.

> I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (vv. 1-3)

Paul’s emotions here are so strong that he makes unusual statements to prove he is not lying. Paul explicitly tells us he is not exaggerating. He tells us it is the truth “in Christ.” Paul tell us both his conscience and the Holy Spirit bear witness that he is telling the truth. Why does Paul, a man of truth, make these kinds of statements? He makes them because of the intensity of the statements that follow. He is in “unceasing anguish” for Israel’s salvation. It is “unceasing.” And it is “anguish.” He never stops thinking about it. It is mental, emotional, and physical pain. Paul uses words here he never used about the gentiles. In verse 3, Paul invokes an intercession that is reminiscent of Moses’ when he says that he wishes he could be cut off if it would result in Israel’s salvation (Exodus 32:32). That statement is so extreme, so radical that it
makes sense of Paul’s qualifying statements preceding it. Paul is not lying. We are on holy ground here. The apostle is expressing something beyond human sentiment.

The key to these phrases is found in verse 1. Paul is speaking the truth “in Christ.” Where did Paul get this burden for his fellow Jews? He got it from Jesus. What led Paul to his expression of sacrifice and love in verse 3? Verse 3 is the very expression of the depths of love that Jesus has for Israel. Jesus was willing to be cut off and accursed for the sake of Israel. To this day, He is considered accursed by most of Israel, and He has endured it in order to secure salvation for the remnant who will believe. Paul received the divine burden God has for His own people. This is Paul’s groan, but it is also God’s groan expressed through Paul. Paul is in agony over Israel because God is in agony over Israel. This leaves us with one overwhelming question, “Why isn’t the church in agony over Israel?”

The depth of Paul’s anguish simply does not make sense if Israel’s calling has ended and the church is the “new Israel.” If the church is the new Israel, it means that all of Israel is saved. However, as we have already seen, the New Testament never redefines Israel. That is why Paul is in agony, and he tells us that plainly in Romans 9:4.

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

Paul reminds his readers that the promises belong to Israel. Paul does not reassign them to the church. In Ephesians, Paul celebrates that the gentiles have been brought into the family promises. In Romans 9, Paul affirms the promises still belong to the Israelites. These two tensions must be maintained. Gentiles have been welcomed in, and the promises remain to Israel. Some have said Israel here means the church, but we have already seen Israel is used consistently in the New Testament to refer to the Jewish people. The context of Romans 9 also tells us that Paul is speaking of the Jewish people. He calls them “Israelites.” He tells us that he is in agony over them. Paul is not in agony over the church. He is in agony over Israel, precisely because the promises were made to her and yet the nation as a whole has rejected them.

Here is the critical point: Paul sees Israel as elect and yet not saved. Yes, she has promises. Yes, she is chosen. Yes, those in Israel who have rejected Jesus are lost. This is the source of Paul’s agony. He has a burden for the gentiles, but it is different from his anguish over Israel. Paul is burdened for the gentiles because he wants to see them brought into the family of God. He is in anguish over the Jews because they were born as chosen by God and yet are cut off from their inheritance. Their election is real, and it is why Paul’s anguish at their loss of salvation is so real.

Paul continues from here to wrestle through two very difficult points:

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Israel remains the elect people of God, and yet Israel is not enjoying the benefits of their election.

Paul has to explain why the Word of God has not failed. The prophets all promised the salvation of Israel, so how can Paul demand that the nations submit to a Jewish King who has not brought salvation to all of Israel?

Isaac and Ishmael

Though Israel’s present predicament is agonizing, in Romans 9:6-7 Paul begins to explain why the Word of God has not failed.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

Paul introduces a dilemma by making a play on words. He says not all descended from Israel belong to Israel. Paul uses Israel in verse 6 in one instance to refer to Jacob and in the second instance to refer to the kingdom of Israel under Jesus’ leadership. The Jewish people are all descended from Jacob who was called Israel, but not all of those descended from Israel are participating in the kingdom of Israel. Paul is introducing the horrible concept that it is possible to be a descendant of Israel and yet be cut off from the benefits of being a part of God’s present-day Israel.

It is important to see what Paul is doing. He is explaining why what is happening to Israel and that it is not unusual in Israel's history. It has happened before. At key points in Israel's redemptive history, God's divine election has created a division in Israel and caused individuals who were born to inherit blessing to ultimately be lost and cut off from that blessing. Paul’s explanation here is very technical, but it draws on the same principle as Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7. In his sermon, Stephen points out that Moses was a very controversial choice to lead Israel—so controversial that the people resisted his leadership at several key points. God elected a leader for Israel with whom most of Israel did not agree, and it has happened again as God elected Jesus as the leader of Israel, but most of Israel does not agree with God’s choice.

Tragically, this has happened throughout redemptive history. The first example Paul uses is Isaac and Ishmael. Both were born to Abraham, and therefore, both were destined to receive blessing as sons of Abraham. In fact, even after he was sent away, Ishmael's promise of blessing was affirmed:

“And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” (Genesis 21:13)
Ishmael was born as a son of Abraham, a member of Abraham's household, and positioned for blessing. To understand Paul’s point about election, and how serious election is, this is important to recognize. God chose Isaac for a specific purpose, but He always intended Ishmael to receive blessing as a part of Abraham’s family. In fact, to this day, the descendants of Ishmael are ultimately destined for blessing in Abraham’s family. They are destined to become a great nation according to the promise the angel gave Hagar (Genesis 21:18).

Ishmael was sent away from the family, not because God rejected him, but because he refused to recognize Isaac’s election as the one God had chosen for a unique redemptive purpose. We can see this in Genesis 21:

And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” (Genesis 21:8-10)

When Isaac was weaned, probably between two and three years of age, we see Ishmael laughing at him. The word used here for laughing can be interpreted to be mocking, which is why Paul, in Galatians 4:29, says that Ishmael “persecuted” Isaac. When Isaac was weaned, it would have been a great time of celebration, and there is no doubt that Abraham and Sarah would have expressed joy over Isaac as the chosen son. Isaac’s calling would have been front and center as Abraham and Sarah hosted an extravagant celebration (“great feast”) that ultimately celebrated Isaac’s election. In that context, Ishmael mocked the chosen son. No doubt, as the older son of Abraham, he looked down on the one God has chosen as a younger brother and lesser than him. It was a classic case of God’s overlooking the stronger and older and choosing the younger and weaker.

To understand what happens, we have to remember that Ishmael was not cast out of the house when he was born. He was not even cast out of the house when Isaac was born. He was cast out of the house when he refused to recognize the election of God on Isaac. He mocked God’s choice and ended up banished from Abraham. He had a covenant destiny of his own, which remained even after he was banished, but he refused to recognize God had chosen another to be the one to fulfill Abraham’s promise. Ishmael was still positioned to receive blessing but would not be the one through whom the promise was fulfilled. When Ishmael mocked God’s plan, he was cut off or sent away from the covenant family. He was born to receive blessing in Abraham’s house but was cut off when he rejected God’s elect.

Paul is reminding us that, throughout Israel’s history, when God chooses an individual for His redemptive purposes, there are those who resist His choice and end up separated from the people of God. Paul expects us to see that the way Ishmael was
born as Abraham’s descendant and yet cut off because of offense at Isaac is a prototype for Israel’s crisis. The Jewish people, as the descendants of Abraham, are born as part of the covenant family, but their rejection of the one whom God has elected can cause them to be “sent away” or put outside of the covenant family they were born into.

God’s election of Jesus is offensive to most of the earth, but the most shocking part of it is that it is offensive to Israel. While the nations are offended at God’s election of the Jewish people for His unique redemptive purposes, the Jewish people are offended at God’s election of Jesus as the man who will fulfill His redemptive purposes. The glorious promise of the gospel is, people groups who reject God’s election can ultimately be restored to covenant destiny. Paul will passionately make that case in Romans 11.

Israel’s present condition is not her final condition. Israel will return to her God and be brought into her covenant destiny. The nation’s rejection of God’s elect Messiah will come to an end. If Israel can be brought in to her covenant destiny, then God will redeem the nations as well. Ishmael’s descendants will also come into their covenant destiny. A day will come when Ishmael’s descendants recognize God’s election of Israel and are restored to their covenant destiny as children of Abraham.

When Paul tells this story in Galatians, he uses the language of the one “born of the Spirit” and the one “born of the flesh”:

But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. (4:29)

Paul uses that same language again in Romans 9 when he refers to those in Israel who have rejected Jesus as Israel’s Messiah:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (vv. 6-8)

Paul expects us to make the comparison between what happened to Abraham’s sons when Ishmael rejected Isaac to what is happening now to Abraham’s descendants when they reject the chosen heir. Abraham had two sons born for blessing, but one lost his position in the house when he rejected God’s election. Today, Abraham’s sons are born for blessing, set apart from the rest of the nations, and yet, in their rejection of the One God has chosen, they end up separated from their calling. They end up “children of the flesh” and not children of the Spirit. The children of the flesh were born for blessing, but do not inherit it when they resist God’s election.

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When God elected Isaac to be Abraham’s heir, He did not reject Ishmael. Isaac’s calling did not invalidate Ishmael. Isaac was simply chosen to be the one through whom the seed would come, and he was given a unique function in the mission of God. Had Ishmael accepted the redemptive calling of Isaac, and submitted to it, he could have received great blessing from it. This is where we have to understand that God’s election in Romans 9 was not simply a decision by Him to save one and not the other. It was election to a redemptive purpose. Ishmael was still part of the family and still had a promise; he just did not have Isaac’s promise. Isaac’s election tested Ishmael, and the result was a son who should have received blessing but lost it. So it is to this day.

Across the Arab world, we see an anti-Semitism in the culture that continues to reject the calling of Isaac. Islam seeks to dominate the Arab world by declaring God chose neither Isaac nor Jesus for his redemptive purpose. However, when the descendants of Ishmael recognize God’s work through the Jewish people and embrace the Jewish Messiah, they are immediately received back into the family of God and begin to fulfill their destiny as descendants of Ishmael.

Paul connects that terrible reality to the present-day crisis Israel faces. Though there is a remnant in Israel, the nation has rejected God’s election of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Because of offense at the one whom God chose, Israel remains cut off as a people from their covenant destiny. However, as the descendants of Jacob turn to their Messiah, they are grafted back into to their covenant destiny (Romans 11:23-24).

The good news in the midst of Israel’s crisis is, God will ultimately bring Israel to a point of salvation:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah”(Jeremiah 31:31)

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (vv. 33-34)

And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” (Romans 11:26-27)

While Israel is presently in crisis due to offense at God’s election, a day is coming when God will bring the nation to salvation. Though the controversy of Jesus has divided the nation, God has made a holy and solemn promise that a day will come
when He brings the entire nation into its covenant destiny. *Israel’s present crisis is not the end of Israel’s promise.* In other words, Israel’s rejection of God’s Son does not invalidate their calling as a people. The glory of God is that, even when His people reject His Son, He forms circumstances that end up ultimately bringing His people into their covenanted destiny. Therefore, we have both the crisis of Israel’s present condition and the biblical promise that Israel will ultimately be saved.

When individuals reject God’s means of accomplishing His plan, which expresses itself through a rejection of the election of God, they suffer deep loss, but it does not invalidate God’s calling over that people group. This is illustrated first in the fall of Adam and Eve. The sin in the garden shattered man’s condition and has resulted in immeasurable suffering for human beings ever since; however, it did not invalidate man’s ultimate calling. God remains committed to bringing humanity into our God-ordained calling. Israel’s rejection of Messiah has brought a great calamity on the nation, and yet God remains committed to Israel’s calling. In the same way, though Ishmael rejected Isaac’s election and brought incredible wounding to his people, God remains committed to bringing Ishmael into His calling. God promised Ishmael’s descendants that they would become a great nation, and He will bring it to pass (Genesis 17:20; 21:13, 18). He will ultimately bring Ishmael’s descendants into their calling and destiny as a people.

*Though the failure of a people does not invalidate God’s calling, it does cause many individuals to suffer great loss.* In Romans 9, we need to recognize just how serious the issue of God’s election is. Ishmael’s descendants have suffered throughout generations because of Ishmael’s offense at Isaac’s election. Israel has suffered tremendously as a people because of offense at Jesus’ election; ergo, Paul is in unceasing anguish (Romans 9:1-3) even though he is confident God will fulfill His promise (Romans 11:26). God’s election creates controversy, and our response to God’s election has grave consequences. The crisis of both Isaac and Ishmael’s descendants reminds us just how serious the issue of God’s election is. It is not a small issue that we can afford to ignore. The response of the human heart to God’s election has dramatic consequences for individuals and nations.

The Bible warns that the age ends in the nations surrounding Jerusalem, which means the age ends in a contest over election. Not only will the nations resist the election of Jesus as God’s chosen King, they will go even further and reject His election of Jerusalem as His chosen city and the Jewish people as the nation among whom He wants to establish His kingdom. The final act of rebellion from the nations of the earth will be to reject God’s election by resisting the election of the Jewish people to their redemptive purpose.

The Bible paints a serious picture of the nations’ gathering around Jerusalem and a persecution of the Jewish people (Isaiah 13:8; Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 7:21-22; Daniel

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12:1; Joel 3:1-3; Zechariah 12:2-3; 13:8-9; 14:1-4, 9, 11; Matthew 24:15-22; Revelation 11:2; 12:13). This should make us sober. Not understanding God’s purpose for election will leave the church without understanding the crisis that is coming in the nations. It causes us to not understand the significance of the global anti-Semitism in a generation where the language of Jew hatred is rising in the nations again in the most vitriolic forms. Just seventy years after the Holocaust, Europe is no longer safe for Jewish communities. We have to see that, when the nations express their animosity towards the Jew, they are ultimately rejecting the election of God. Ishmael was tested on the issue of election. Israel was tested on the issue of election. God will test the nations on the issue of election.

When the test of election comes, we look at the One God chose with natural eyes and say, “surely it cannot be him” because God does not choose individuals for His purposes the way man does. This is why Isaiah warned that the Messiah would come in an unexpected package. He would not be what men were looking for.

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (53:2-3)

God chooses the things we despise and creates controversy thereby. Ishmael as a young boy growing in his strength looked at Isaac and saw a small toddler and thought, “This cannot be the heir that is to rule over me.” Israel looked at Jesus in His meekness and humiliation as He suffered on the cross and said, “Surely this is not the King of the Jews.” Election creates controversy, but this is part of the purpose of election. God does this for two different reasons.

The first reason God’s election creates controversy is because He does not choose on the basis of human strength, beauty, and achievement. If He did, He would be giving merit to our own strength and self-righteousness. God chooses those who are weak in order to demonstrate that all our weak. God’s choice of the weak and unexpected exposes the depth of self-righteousness in humanity. Those who are chosen demonstrate how unworthy they are to be chosen when they demonstrate their weakness and failure. Those who are not chosen demonstrate their own self-righteousness when they react to those God chooses and seek to persecute them. Their response comes from an internal self-righteousness that is deeply offended at having not been chosen. The ultimate truth is, none of us are worthy of His attention, no matter how deeply we feel that God owes us something. He owes nothing either to the ones who are chosen or the ones not chosen for a particular purpose.

The second reason God elects seemingly unqualified individuals is because it sets a context to demonstrate His power. God intentionally chooses those who cannot
accomplish their redemptive purpose in their own strength and ability. He does this for two reasons. He does it because His purposes will not be accomplished in the strength of human might. What God has in mind is too glorious to be achieved in human strength alone. It requires God to accomplish what He wants to do with humanity. God is not content with something we can achieve. He wants to labor with humanity to produce something that only He can do and that is the second reason God works this way: He desires deep partnership. He is not content for us to perform our function or achieve our purpose on our own. He wants to do it in deep partnership with us.

God’s election is so much more than simply His choosing and rejecting people. His election is the means why which He advances His purpose in the nation, and His work of election creates a crisis for humanity. This is why we must understand it. Because He elects the unqualified, His election transcends the performance of the elected. This means a people group can fail and yet remain elected. As we will see, Paul makes this exact point about Israel. God elected Israel. Israel, as a nation, rejected Messiah. Those who reject Messiah suffer deep loss, yet the nation’s election remains. It’s important for us to see election as something much more than simply God choosing individuals for heaven or hell. God’s election actually creates a crisis, and the way individuals respond to that crisis, both those who are elect and those who are not “elect,” can determine whether they are included or cut off from the people of God.

No wonder we find Paul in such deep anguish as unbelieving Israel is both elect and cut off. When we think about the extent of Israel’s promises and the depth of Israel’s crisis, our hearts should groan with the same anguish that Paul’s heart groaned with. They remain the chosen nation and beloved of God. They have been rejected and persecuted by all the nations of the earth simply because God chose to make them His people and put His name on them. At the same time, their rejection of God’s chosen King has caused them to be cut off from Him as a nation. Only a remnant within Israel has recognized and received God’s King, and this is one of the great tragedies in the earth. The chosen people, who remain chosen, are cut off from the very thing they are chosen for!

I’m convinced, if we understood the depth of Israel’s crisis, there would be more agonizing over than analyzing Israel’s condition. Paul’s language in Romans 9:1-3 is so raw because God wants us to not just understand Israel’s crisis but also to feel it. More than that, he intends us to become intercessors for Israel. When Israel failed in the wilderness, Moses stood before God and refused to go on without her. Moses put his own salvation on the line (Exodus 32:32). Paul stood before God and was willing to offer his own salvation for his countrymen because he was not willing to go on without Israel, either. Before the age ends, a church will emerge that will refuse to go on without Israel and will enter into the kind of intercession that both Moses and Paul entered into for the sake of Israel. One of the great tragedies in our generation is that

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there is a lot of information about Israel and many arguments about Israel, but at the same time very little anguish over Israel.

**Jacob and Esau**

After using the illustration of Isaac and Ishmael, Paul uses the story of Jacob and Esau as his next illustration of what happens when the people of God reject the one God has chosen:

_For this is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:9-13)_

God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael created controversy, but His choice of Jacob over Esau creates even more. God chooses Jacob, and not Esau, to carry the promise and advance His redemptive purpose. As they both grow, we see that Esau is the oldest, strongest, and seemingly the best qualified one to carry the family’s name. Jacob is weak with an incredibly flawed character. Even his name highlights the fact that his character is flawed. Esau is the most qualified, but God passes over him and chooses Jacob. Again, God chooses the man who has to be supernaturally brought into his promise, rather than the child who possesses natural strength. We would have bypassed Jacob, but God does not in order to demonstrate the glory of His salvation.

This passage is often viewed as a summary of God’s decision to save Jacob and damn Esau. However, that is not the main point of the story. The story is emphasizing the point that Paul made in the story of Isaac and Ishmael. God’s election of individuals for his redemptive purposes can actually cause the people of God to fall away. To recognize what Paul is saying, we need to look very carefully at what he says.

Paul tells us first that, before Jacob and Esau were born and before they had done anything good or bad, God chooses Jacob. Thus, we see God does not respond to human effort. He selects Jacob for His own reasons. Esau’s strength did not impress God. Jacob was the younger and, therefore, not naturally positioned to receive the family inheritance, and yet God chooses the weaker brother with deep character flaws. We would have bypassed Jacob, but God did not in order to demonstrate the glory of His salvation.

Paul’s next phrase is the key phrase emphasizing just why we must correctly understand this story. Paul says that God chooses Jacob so that the “purpose of election” might stand. God has a purpose in election that we must recognize. If we

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miss the purpose of election, we will miss Paul’s explanation of Israel’s crisis and his warning about the seriousness of recognizing God’s election.

Most people assume the purpose of election is for God to demonstrate His right to save Jacob and not save Esau. God certainly has that right, but that is not Paul’s main point here. Paul’s readers would have assumed God, as Creator, could do anything He wants with His creation. God’s right to save one and not save another merely on His own ability to choose apart from their works was not a radical point for Paul’s readers. There is another purpose for election that Paul wants us to recognize in order to help understand Israel’s crisis through the rejection of Jesus.

The purpose of election is to demonstrate that all are unworthy and all are unrighteous. No one is better qualified to be chosen than another. God picks Jacob, and Jacob’s flaws graphically illustrate how unqualified He is. Israel’s sins throughout history have illustrated how unworthy Israel is. However, Jacob’s failure, like Israel’s failure, is not because Jacob is any worse than any other. If God has picked Esau, the one who appears strongest, Esau would have failed in his calling as well because Jacob’s failure demonstrates the human situation. Jacob’s failure is human. *Israel’s failure is the failure of humanity.*

So, regardless of whether God chooses Jacob or Esau, either one will fail in his calling. If God chooses a massive nation rather than a small nation like Israel for His purposes, that nation will fail as well. However, if God chooses Esau, we would have to assume God responds to human strength and our “goodness” is attractive to Him. By choosing Jacob, God thunders throughout history that He is not moved by the strength or appearance of man. He can accomplish His purposes through the weakest just as easily as the He can through those we perceive to be strong.

God had to elect the weaker one so that we can know His love is expressed without regard to what we can offer Him as humans. When we understand this correctly, it liberates us to know God’s mercy towards us is on the basis of His goodness towards us. It’s not a response to our own goodness. God is not impressed by what humanity considers strong, smart, or good. He loves us because He is good, not because we are good or because He sees something in us that He responds to. He responds to us out of the goodness of who He is and not the goodness of who we are.

Genesis emphasizes this point when it tells the story of how Esau sold his birthright. Esau came in exhausted and hungry from working and desperately wanted something to eat. Jacob offered him something to eat if Esau would give him his birthright. That exchange perfectly illustrates God’s purpose in election. Esau’s strength became his weakness. When he was exhausted, he was willing to trade anything to replenish his strength. His strength was ultimately a liability and did not qualify him for the call of God. Jacob was willing to scheme to try to obtain what God had promised him, also demonstrating how unworthy he was of the call of God (Genesis 25:29-34; 27:5-41).
God also demonstrates the supernatural nature of His salvation by choosing Jacob. Because of who Jacob was, there was no question that God had to do something supernatural to transform Jacob into the leader of a nation. Because of his natural gifting, had God chosen Esau, we might be tempted to think God simply needed to enhance Esau’s natural ability to bring His purposes to past. When God chooses Jacob, we recognize that our salvation must be supernatural. God partners with us deeply, but He does not accomplish His purposes on the basis of our human strength. God must transform us by the power of His Spirit and make us new in order for us to fulfill our calling. This is why Jesus says that we cannot enter the kingdom without being “born again” by the Spirit (John 3:3-8). God’s election demonstrates the supernatural nature of His salvation because the individual who God elects cannot fulfill their calling apart from God’s power.

This should liberate us to approach God with boldness and give courage to those who feel most disqualified to receive His love. However, God’s election actually provokes self-righteousness because we are deeply committed to the fact we are inherently good and have something to offer God. When God picks someone who is “unqualified,” we should rejoice at His goodness; instead, we rage against God or against the person He chose because He did not choose us or He did not choose according to our value system. We would have chosen Esau because he was strong. God choose another, and the nations have raged against that choice ever since. Israel would have chosen a strong leader to liberate her from Rome, but God choose Jesus and sent Him as a suffering servant, and both Israel and the nations have raged against that choice.

God’s election illustrates the condition of the human heart, both in how God elects and in how we respond to His election. This is the purpose of election that Paul wants us to recognize. God’s election cuts to the deepest issues of the heart, and we have to recognize it. It cuts so deeply that the elect people, Israel, can end up cut off (Romans 9:6) from the benefits of their election because of offense at how God chooses to bring them into their calling. Paul is not in agony because Israel is no longer elect. In fact, he affirms the opposite. Israel remains elect; however, within the elect nation of Israel are individual Israelites who are cut off from the elect nation because of their rejection of the man God has chosen.

The nation of Israel remains elect. The Jewish people remain elect in the purposes of God. However, Jewish individuals, though born elect, can end up cut off just as Ishmael and Esau did over a rejection of God’s choice of Jesus. This is why we must see that Paul’s purpose for election here is to demonstrate the nature and goodness of God through the way He advances His redemptive purpose. When we look carefully at the way Paul tells the story, we can better understand the point he is making.

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To summarize, the purpose of election here is not primarily that God elects one to be saved and one lost. It is that God uses election to expose our own self-righteousness, to demonstrate the nature of God, and to demonstrate the need for supernatural salvation to be brought into our calling. Certainly, it is within God’s right to choose some for salvation and not choose others for salvation, but that is not Paul’s primary point here, and verse 12 indicates it.

*She was told, “The older will serve the younger.”*

Note carefully how Paul introduces God’s election of Jacob. Given all the statements in the Old Testament about the destruction of Edom (Esau’s descendants), this would be the perfect place for Paul to quote a verse indicating God’s desire to judge and destroy Esau, but Paul does not do this. When he highlights Jacob’s election, he quotes exactly what Rebecca was told: the older will serve the younger. God’s statement over Jacob’s and Esau’s lives before they were born was simply that Jacob would be preeminent and Esau was to serve him. This is reaffirmed in Genesis 28 when God gives Jacob Abraham’s promise.

*And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* (vv. 28:13-15)

When God gives Jacob his call and promise in Genesis 26, He reiterates that the purpose of the call is to bring blessing on the nations. Jacob is elected to bring salvation to “all” the families or people of the earth. Therefore, the idea that Jacob’s call was at the cost of Esau’s damnation goes against the flow of the promise made. Yes, Jacob was specially chosen, but chosen for a redemptive purpose that would bring blessing to all the families of the earth—including his own family. Therefore, *Jacob’s election is not Esau’s condemnation, rather it is meant to be Esau’s salvation.* However, whether or not Esau participates in that salvation will be determined by how he responds to Jacob.

This is why Rebecca was not told Jacob was accepted and Esau would be rejected. God highlighted their redemptive function in His plan. Jacob would have the challenge of leading God’s redemptive purpose. Esau would have the challenge of serving Jacob. Nowhere in this language does God even hint that He has rejected Esau and has no purpose for him. God told Rebecca He had a purpose for Esau to become a leader of another nation (see Genesis 23:25). The challenge was that Esau’s nation would be called to serve Jacob’s. In order words, God elected one to a
redemptive purpose, but He did not condemn Esau. Paul continues in verse 13 to summarize the history of Esau’s response:

“As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Paul moves from quoting Genesis 25 in Romans 9:13 to quoting Malachi 1 in Romans 9:12. When we recognize the use of Old Testament texts in the New Testament, we often fail to take in the entire context of the passages being quoted, but it is critical to understanding this verse. Paul’s use of the Old Testament indicates his thought process. In other words, there are reasons specific passages come to mind for Paul as he is addressing a specific topic, and we need to ask why was Paul thinking about this passage. Understanding his use of the Old Testament gives direct insight into what he was thinking. Because the Old Testament was the Bible of the early church, Paul expected his readers to be familiar with it and with the context of its passages. Therefore, when Paul quotes an Old Testament passage, he expects his reader to import the context of the passage to get his ultimate meaning.

First, we need to recognize that Malachi 1 has a very different context than Genesis 25. In Genesis 25, God elects Jacob for a redemptive purpose. In Malachi 1, God reminds Israel of her election and responds to the way Esau’s descendants raged against His election of Jacob. Malachi 1 begins with God’s addressing Israel’s complaint regarding all she has suffered. God reminds Israel that, though she sinned, she still exists as a nation. That is proof of His special love for her and the permanence of her election. This is the first reason we can see why Paul quotes this passage. Paul is burdened by the painful reality of Israel’s sin in rejecting Messiah, and yet he also emphasizes God’s love and continuing election towards Israel. In Malachi’s day, Israel had turned from God which caused Israel to experience God’s judgment for her sin. However, in the midst of that judgment, God affirmed His calling on Israel. Individual Israelites were cut off in judgment, but the nation’s promises remained. Paul sees what is happening to Israel as a similar scenario. Most of Israel has rejected Jesus as Messiah; therefore, individual Israelites are cut off, but God’s promises on the nation remain (Romans 9:6).

Malachi also records God’s response to Edom after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. God specifically addresses Edom’s attitude towards Israel in that period of tragedy. Obadiah devotes his entire book to this issue. Ezekiel summarizes it in the following way:

“Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord God, I will deal with you according to the anger and envy that you showed because of your hatred against them. And I will make myself known among them, when I judge you.” (Ezekiel 35:11)

God’s hatred for Esau in Malachi 1 flows from Esau’s attitude towards Jacob. When “Jacob” or Israel was enduring God’s judgment from the Babylonian armies, Esau saw

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it as an opportunity to take advantage of Israel. He joined in the plunder of the Jewish people and sought to claim Israel’s land. Ezekiel identifies the core issue in his oracle against Edom: God will judge Edom because of the anger and envy they held towards Israel. In Israel’s hour of judgment, Edom could have been gracious towards Israel, recognizing their own weakness as a people. Instead, the nation sought to take advantage of Israel’s judgment, demonstrating the envy they had for Israel’s calling. They found joy in the prospect that Israel was being humiliated, and they joined the Babylonian destruction of Israel, hoping to see Israel and her redemptive calling destroyed.

Why did Edom seek Israel’s destruction? Ezekiel makes it plain. There was jealousy over Israel’s election in the plan of God. All of this is what produces God’s statement in Malachi that he loves Jacob (Israel), but hates Esau (Edom). God did not hate Esau from the beginning. He promised to make him a nation though he did not choose him to carry the seed of redemption. God did hate Esau’s response to His election of Jacob. Esau was called to “serve the younger” but did exactly the opposite throughout history. This rejection of divine order and calling culminated in Edom’s response to the Babylonian invasion. Obadiah records God’s anger at Edom’s response because Edom is demonstrating self-righteousness by essentially rejecting God’s sovereign election and seeking her own greatness (Obadiah 2-14).

Because Esau rejected God’s election, and later sought to oppose it, God hated Edom and cut the nation off. Again, we see Paul’s grave warning. Offense at God’s election can cause a people to be cut off from Him. Esau could have received blessing as a nation that honored God’s election of Jacob. Instead, the nation was jealous of Jacob’s calling, and God hated the nation for that jealousy.

If Edom’s destruction was due to the fact that God hated Esau from the beginning, then God would have expressed that hatred in Genesis from the beginning of Esau’s life, but He didn’t. God has no problem later in the redemptive story saying He hates the descendants of Esau, so God is certainly not afraid of expressing His hatred. He doesn’t say He hates Esau when He is born because that is not the context for His anger towards Esau. In the beginning, God simply made a declaration: Esau would have to serve Jacob. Esau was given an opportunity to recognize the purpose of election—that neither he nor Jacob deserved anything. God gave Esau a purpose as the father of a nation, but Esau would have to make the decision to serve Jacob and recognize the greater calling.

**Moses and Pharaoh**

While there are other elements at play in the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh, it is important to recognize Paul is still thinking of the controversy of God’s election when he includes the story of Moses and Pharaoh in Romans 9.
For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Romans 9:15-17)

God’s election of Moses was controversial on two points. First, God’s election of Moses was extremely controversial for Israel. Because Moses is so deeply associated with the Jewish people, it can be easy for us to forget that Moses was a very difficult for Israel to accept. He never lived a day in his life as a slave. He was raised in the palace, and when he discovered who he was, he left. When he returned after his encounter at the burning bush, he came as the leader over an enslaved people—the same man who had personally never lived under slavery. He had a life of privilege and, in many ways, probably seemed more Egyptian in culture than Hebrew. It was difficult for the slaves of Israel to receive one as their leader who had never shared their burden. Stephen makes this point extensively in his sermon in Acts 7 where he repeatedly makes the point of how controversial God’s choice of Moses was and how the people resisted it (vv. 20-51). The conflict between Moses and the people of Israel was no doubt exacerbated by the reality of who Moses was.

Second, God’s election of Moses was extremely controversial for Pharaoh. We can easily forget Moses and Pharaoh were raised as brothers. They were raised in the same household. Moses and Pharaoh shared a conflict that was very similar to Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau. They were raised together, though Moses was an adopted son, so Pharaoh was the clear heir and, therefore, the one worthy of greater honor. When Moses came to challenge Pharaoh, there was no doubt that Pharaoh took great offense at the idea of his adopted brother making demands. Pharaoh did not like that God had chosen his half-brother to display his power. This was one of the social dynamics behind Pharaoh’s refusal to submit to Moses’ demands. Pharaoh was not going to submit to Moses. God’s desire to display His power through Moses required Pharaoh, like Esau, to serve his brother, and Pharaoh did not agree with God’s election of Moses.

The Tragedy of Offense at God’s Election

To understand Romans 9 and Paul’s view of Israel, we have to understand Paul’s primary point in the chapter. His primary point is not salvation in a generation. Instead, Paul is describing a sequence of events that involves God’s election, the response of people born into the covenant to election, and the tragedy that comes when God’s people are offended by the one He elects. This passage in Romans 9 is frequently interpreted as Paul’s soteriology—that is, his explanation of how we are saved. However, Paul began explaining his soteriology in Romans 1. He labored chapter after chapter in Romans to describe how we are made right with God. In Romans 9, he
began answering a very specific question: if God is faithful to His Word, how can it be that the Jewish Messiah has appeared and yet most of Israel has rejected Him? Paul has to prove from Scripture Israel’s rejection of Messiah is horrible and painful, but it has happened before at critical moments in Israel’s history. Abraham’s family, the ones born into the blessing, have lost their blessing through offense at the One God elects. This is the question Paul is answering, and we must have the question clear in order to understand his answer and his argument from Scripture. When we understand the question Paul is answering, we can better understand God’s purpose in election, which He is committed to, and understand the permanence of His election. Israel’s election, therefore, is divisive in nature yet permanent.

The Divisive Nature of Election

In Romans 9, Paul emphasizes the divisive nature of God’s election. God’s election of an individual in Israel’s history has repeatedly created a crisis event in which some of those born for blessing end up being cut off from the family. Throughout history, God’s selection of an individual has brought Israel to a place where those destined to receive blessing lost it due to offense at God’s election.

God’s election of Jesus creates a similar crisis for the Jewish people. Many believe and come into blessing through Jesus. Many more reject God’s election and end up being cut off. Remember, Paul is explaining to a mostly gentile congregation why Israel has rejected Messiah while reminding them that this is normal for Israel and evident in her history. God has elected a man, Jesus, and Israel has rejected that man. Just as we have seen in the examples.

God shocks Israel by making a man King—a man whom Israel would not have chosen—just as He shocked Ishmael and Esau by choosing the “weaker” and younger. Like before in Israel’s history, there comes a sharp division. Those who submit to God’s chosen King are “true Israel” in the sense that they are continuing with God’s plan for Israel. Those who reject the elect Man are cut off. In other words, they are experiencing what happened to Ishmael and Esau. They were born into the covenant family, and yet their response to God’s election caused them to be separated from the blessing that was theirs.

It is time for the global church to enter into grief over this. Millions of gentiles have obtained access to something we did not deserve, and yet the test of election has caused millions of Jews to lose access to what they were born to possess. Can we imagine how God grieves over this? Jesus Himself wept with pain over Israel’s rejection:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are
sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37)

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it. (Luke 19:41)

What must have Jesus felt? He was the elect of God, sent to rescue Israel, and yet Israel rejected Him as her King. Can we imagine the pain in His holy heart as He sobbed over their rejection, not just feeling the pain of it, but knowing the consequences of it for Israel? We rarely think of it, but Israel’s offense at God’s election has cost Him dearly. He is the bridegroom of Israel. He loves Israel deeply and remains committed to her. Can we imagine what He feels over her? Can we imagine the pain that was in God’s heart as He considered what the election of Jesus would do to Israel and the pain in Jesus’ tears as He experienced the divisive nature of His election for Israel?

Abraham was not unmoved when he had to kick his son Ishmael out of his house. Isaac was in pain when his son Esau raged against Jacob. God is not unmoved by the division of Israel over His Son. He wept over it and continues to weep over it.

Yes, God’s election is divisive and costly. While God’s election of Jesus has cost Israel dearly, we do not perceive what God’s election of Israel is going to cost the nations. As we get closer to the end of the age, we are going to see an anti-Semitism emerge in the earth that is far worse than anything we have seen so far. Even though there have been centuries of anti-Semitism, the nations have yet to face the ultimate test over God’s election of the Jewish people because God has not rescinded His election of the Jewish people. Their election remains, and so the test of election remains for the nations. That test cost the church in Germany dearly in the 1930s, and we have little reason to believe that it won’t cost the global church just as dearly when the question of the future of the Jewish people becomes a global issue.

The controversy over Jesus’ election caused many to declare, “Crucify Him,” and the controversy of Israel’s election will cause the nations to rise up and declare, “Crucify them!” The controversy remains because God remains. The issue of God’s election is ultimately the issue of God. The nations rage against His election because they rage against Him, and they have not yet demonstrated their greatest rage against Him (see Psalm 2:1-6).

The Permanence of Election

If the church is going to pass the coming test of election, we must understand the permanence of election. Though Paul grieved over the condition of individual Israelites, he clearly affirms Israel’s election remains. Paul’s quotation of Malachi 1, where God demonstrates His love for “Jacob,” is an excellent example of this.
Malachi was addressing the nation after a period of judgment for sin and adjusting a corrupt priesthood. In that context, God declares His unfailing love for Israel. Though the Jewish people can experience judgment for disobedience, they remain a called people—just as most of humankind is under judgment yet God’s calling on humankind remains.

This is one of Paul’s main points throughout Romans. While Paul articulates the crisis of Israel’s unbelief, he also is very clear that Israel remains elect:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? (3:1-3)

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (9:4-5)

But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.” (10:21)

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? (11:1-2)

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (11:11-12)

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (11:15)

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (11:28-29)

Paul’s summary of Israel’s condition in Romans makes it clear that their election remains. Even when Israel falls into sin, God remains committed to her. The covenants belong to them. Paul is emphatic about his expectation of a future restoration of the Jewish people. A day will come when they come into fullness and are restored to their God. In Romans 11, Paul makes several adamant statements. God has not rejected His
people. Their restoration and reconciliation to Him will be like coming to life from the dead. Paul makes his clearest statement about Israel in Romans 11:28-29, “As regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.”

Paul is clear. God’s election of Israel is irrevocable. This is how we know Paul is not primarily addressing individual salvation in Romans 9 through 11. He states clearly that Israel is both elect and cut off from the benefits of her election. Because Israel is the elect nation and the gentiles are grafted into Israel, Paul refers to believers as the “elect” in other letters, but that term does not only refer to individuals who are being saved. That is why we must understand God’s election of a people group. When God elects a people group, He makes a commitment to bring that people group into its divine calling, but individuals within that group who resist Him can be cut off from their election. We must understand how election functions within people groups, or we will miss what Paul wants us to understand. The consequences for rejecting Messiah are severe for individuals real individual are cut off from what they were born for. But the calling remains on the people group and will ultimately be fulfilled.

This is precisely what Jesus taught the disciples to expect in Acts 1. Jesus spent His final forty days with His disciples teaching on the kingdom because it was such an important topic to Him. When He finished teaching, the disciples had one summary question:

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

The disciples’ question indicates that Jesus’ teaching taught them to expect a fulfillment of Israel’s promises. If Jesus had not intended to fulfill Israel’s promises, He would have explained that in His forty days of teaching. Instead, what He taught for forty days led the disciples to expect and long for a restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Jesus had experienced Israel’s rejection and was fully aware of the crisis in Israel that would unfold over the following centuries, but He also remained completely committed to her election and calling.

Paul gives another shocking example of how secure Israel’s election is in Romans 11.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (vv. 11-12)

Paul explains the redemptive side of Israel’s crisis. Israel’s rejection of Messiah as a people has resulted in the proclamation of Jesus throughout the nations of the earth. Because Israel did not embrace Him, the apostles were forced to go to the gentiles,
resulting in many of the gentiles embracing Israel’s King. Israel’s fall resulted in the proclamation of the gospel among the gentiles. Gentile believers actually owe their access to the gospel to the fall of Israel. This is one of more staggering statements by Paul that the vast majority of gentile believers have not addressed.

Again, according to Paul, we owe our access to the gospel to the fall of Israel. In light of this, we have to ask a very serious question: why is the global church not committed to night and day intercession for the salvation of the people whose loss has meant so much gain for her—for the gentiles?

Israel’s election was ultimately for the purpose of declaring the nature of God to the nations. Her calling to be chief among the nations was ultimately so that she could serve the nations in sharing the knowledge of God. God had chosen Israel as the vessel through whom the gentile nations would come into the knowledge of the true God. Notice carefully what Paul is saying: Israel’s fall has resulted in the knowledge of God being declared through the nations. In other words, the very thing Israel was called to is happening because of her—even though she is in disobedience. God is so committed to Israel’s election that Israel serves His purpose whether she is in obedience or disobedience. God chose, from the beginning, to declare the knowledge of God to the nations through Israel, and most of us would assume that would happen through a righteous, obedient Israel. Paul tells us that Israel serves her redemption function even in disobedience because God remains committed to His plan of election. Israel will ultimately fulfill her call in fullness when Jesus is ruling on the earth as the King of Israel, but God also remains committed to her election now.

Not only is Israel’s election permanent, her salvation is sure. While the present condition of most of the Jewish people should cause us the kind of anguish it caused Paul, nevertheless, Paul was confident that a day would come when God rescued Israel’s redemptive purpose. Because God’s election of Israel is permanent, He will not always leave the Jewish people in their present condition. A day will come when all of Israel is saved. The promises made will be fulfilled:

Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (Romans 11:12)

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (v. 15)

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.” (vv. 25-26)
Paul’s Summary of God’s Plan

The whole flow of Paul’s thought in Romans 9 through 11 illustrates how Paul views Israel’s election. After Paul describes Israel’s predicament in Romans 9, he continues on into Romans 10. There, he makes the case that the Old Testament predicted a scenario where the gentiles would end up provoking Israel to return to her God. Paul uses these Old Testament predictions to explain the shocking expansion of the gospel among the gentiles. He recognizes it is God’s plan for the gospel to spread out into the nations to produce gentile believers who are capable of speaking the Word of God back to Israel. Because the Jews were scattered among the gentiles, even in Paul’s day, Paul sees this as the way God would stretch out His hands to Israel.

But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.” Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.” (Romans 10:19-21)

Paul uses this Old Testament foundation as he moves into Romans 11 to establish the concept that the gentiles are to provoke the Jews to jealousy. Pagan gentiles who receive the gospel will be so transformed by the God of Israel that who they are will provoke the Jews to return to their God. Paul sees this prediction in the Old Testament as the prediction of his ministry. If there are not gentiles in the nations to provoke Israel, Israel can never be saved. Because the Bible predicts gentiles will provoke Israel to return to her God, it means that, at some point, the gentiles must turn to the God of Israel. Paul is carrying this message to the gentiles and seeing it bear fruit among them and, therefore, recognizes his ministry as part of God’s plan to save Israel. This certainly doesn’t exclude the work of saved Jews in Israel’s salvation—after all, Paul was one—but it does demonstrate there is a divine plan whereby which God will humble the gentiles by causing them to accept a Jewish Messiah and humble the Jews by causing them to receive their gospel back from gentiles:

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. (Romans 11:11)

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. (vv. 13-14)

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

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Paul’s point is that Israel’s fall, while shocking and unanticipated, is actually advancing God’s plan. God always had it in His mind for the knowledge of Him to spread among the gentiles and for the reception of the gospel among the gentiles to ultimately serve His purposes for Israel. What we have to recognize is, Paul is reminding a mostly gentile church that Israel remains central to God’s plan even in the mist of her fall. The gospel is going to the gentiles, but the gentiles are going to minister it back to Israel, provoke her to jealousy, so “all Israel will be saved.”

Again, Paul is affirming Israel’s election. Israel remains chosen and elect before God for His purposes. If Israel was no longer elect, Paul would not be in anguish over her situation because he was never in this kind of anguish for the gentiles whom God did not elect. Neither would God be orchestrating the spread of the gospel among the gentiles in such a way that it resulted in Israel’s salvation. God remains focused on Israel’s salvation because Israel remains elect. If Israel’s fall invalidated her election, then her election would fail to serve the “purpose of election.” The purpose of election is to demonstrate that no one is worthy. If Israel can lose her election, then it makes her election dependent on her own ability rather than on the power of God. Israel remains elect so that God can demonstrate the glory of His mercy and the power of His salvation.

This is demonstrated vividly by the calamity in the wilderness during the Exodus. After God delivered Israel and brought her out into the wilderness, the people ended up forming a golden calf and worshipping it as the god who delivered them from Egypt. The nation was discontent with God and Moses and turned to idolatry. This should have nullified Israel’s calling completely. Israel had rejected God and created a new set of national gods and idols. In the midst of their wicked celebration, Moses intercedes for the calling of Israel. He reminds God that Israel’s salvation is ultimately a matter of His glory. If Israel is destroyed by divine judgment and does not enter into her calling then the nations have a right to ridicule YHWH as the God who was unable to do what He had promised.

In Deuteronomy 9, we find Moses recounting his prayer:

And I prayed to the Lord, “O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, ‘Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.’ For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out

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by your great power and by your outstretched arm.” (vv. 26-29)

Moses interceded on the basis of the same principle that Paul recognizes. Israel's future is ultimately dependent on God, not Israel. The purpose of election requires God to bring a people into their destiny. This means the people cannot invalidate their election. If God has spoken that they will be a great and righteous nation, then they will be a great and righteous nation. If their failure is able to invalidate their call, it means their strength is able to bring their calling to pass; however, when God elects, He always elects individuals to callings they cannot fulfill in their own strength.

God elected Abraham to have a son, but Abraham could not have a son. God had to supernaturally touch Sarah to bring to pass Abraham's destiny. The way the story began is the way it will end. Israel cannot come into her calling in her own strength. This also means she cannot invalidate her calling by her weakness because her weakness only serves to demonstrate God's purpose in election. God will not be humiliated before the nations. Israel's fall will not be the last word for Israel. God will bring Israel into her destiny. Paul, like Moses, recognizes that God will bring Israel into her calling regardless of her troubled history. Paul recognizes that, even in the midst of Israel's worse crisis, God is advancing His plan for her salvation. This is precisely why he tell us that the Word of God has not failed (Romans 9:6). Israel's fall is not the end of the story. It is part of a process that will bring Israel's salvation to pass (Romans 11:25-26).

The calling and election of the nation is sure, but we must hold that in tension with the anguish Paul feels for the real loss that occurs in Israel's rebellion. Though Israel as a people remain called, individuals within Israel can be broken off from their calling. Paul reminds us of the grave situation of individuals within Israel who have rejected Messiah:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree. (Romans 11:17)

That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. (v. 20)

Israel's calling and election is irrevocable (see Romans 11:29), but individuals within Israel really are broken off and separated from that calling and election. Again, we have to hold both of these things in tension: Israel's unique calling remains and is guaranteed, not by Israel's strength, but by God's power, and individuals within Israel are broken off from this calling when they reject the means by which God is going to bring it to pass. This is precisely what happened when Israel rebelled in the wilderness. God brought the nation through the wilderness as a people; however,
many individuals in the wilderness died and never saw the Promised Land due to their rebellion.

This is why the subject of election is broader than individual salvation. In fact, from the beginning in Genesis 12, God’s election of Abraham was always broader than individual salvation. When God first chose, or elected, Abraham to a covenant purpose, He promised Abraham that His election of Abraham’s descendants would bless the nations who were not chosen:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

In Abraham’s promise, we see two things regarding election. Those who are born elect (i.e., Abraham’s descendants) can end up being lost, and those who are not born elect (i.e., the gentiles) can receive salvation through God’s plan. This is why we have to be careful not to confuse election in the call and purposes of God with election unto salvation. Paul shows that election and salvation are related, but in his example the elect people’s fall from their salvation is resulting in salvation for those who were not elect. From the beginning, when Abraham and Jacob are first chosen, they are actually told their election will be for the purposes of blessing the nations (the non-elect).

A Summary of God’s Election

Though believers are called the “elect” of God in the New Testament, the concept of election is larger than individual salvation. In Romans 9 through 11, Paul affirms that Israel remains elect—even though he is in anguish over Israel’s condition. We have to understand Israel’s election is permanent and know why it is so.

This generation, perhaps more than any other, must understand this because the earth is currently wrestling with the question of Israel’s continuing election. This is not a small issue because the Bible tells us the age ends with a contest over Israel’s election. If we do not recognize that Israel remains elect, even when unsaved, we will not understand why the nations have and will continue to rage over her. It is ultimately a rage over her calling. Even though she is unsaved, her calling remains and God refuses to end the age without bringing her into it; therefore, the rage over Israel’s election is ultimately not a controversy over Israel but a controversy over the God who elected her.

This makes sense of Israel’s unique predicament. It provides the reason for the Jewish people’s having been so persecuted throughout history. It is precisely because Israel

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remains elected, even in her unbelief, that we stand alongside the Jews. This helps resolve the long tension in the church over how to relate to an unsaved Israel. On one hand, Israel is unsaved, and the nations are called to speak tenderly to her about her God and provoke her to love Him. On the other hand, Israel remains called, and the nations are expected to recognize that and deal tenderly in love with her, knowing the God who called Israel remains committed to her in the same way a father remains committed to a child—even when that child is disobedient.

Paul’s use of biblical precedents to explain why the Word of God has not failed, even though Israel has fallen, serves to illustrate just how serious it is to not recognize God’s election. Paul’s examples show us how much there is to lose when we resist the way in which God chooses to advance His plan. The controversy of Isaac’s election caused Ishmael to lose his place in the household. Esau’s controversy with Jacob’s election caused his descendants to lose everything. Israel’s controversy over Jesus’ election caused them to be broken off. There is a clear warning here: if the gentiles fail to recognize God’s election of Israel, they also face a real risk of being cut off. Paul explicitly warns the gentile church about arrogance over this issue:

*Do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. (Romans 11:18–22)*

We also do well to recognize another evidence of God’s ongoing election of Israel. Paul is in agony over the unsaved among the Jews, but we must recognize the righteous remnant among them. Paul describes Israel’s crisis because Israel is called to be righteous as an entire nation. However, Paul also reminds the gentiles to not be like Elijah who thought he was the only righteous one in Israel:

*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. (Romans 11:2–5)*

Paul reminds us, even though Israel as a nation may have rejected Messiah, there is still a remnant in Israel who love Him. When Elijah thought he was the only one who was faithful, God rebuked him and told him that He had seven thousand more who were faithful in the land. We have to recognize there always has been, and remains to

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this day, a remnant in Israel who are faithful and loyal to God, and that remnant is growing at historic levels. While Israel’s national salvation has not yet come, God is accelerating His salvific work among Jewish individuals. Just as we can say Israel remains elect even though individuals are cut off when they reject God’s Messiah, we can also say the nation can be in disobedience and yet individuals within it be righteous before God.

A key part of recognizing God’s election of Israel is not only delivering the gospel to unsaved Israel, but also standing with the remnant in Israel who are presently saved. If we only mention Israel’s crisis, we are in danger of committing the error of Elijah and assuming all in Israel has fallen. One of the best ways to affirm God’s election of Israel and demonstrate our commitment to her is to be deeply committed to the remnant in Israel who do love Messiah. They are a sign of God’s ensuring commitment to Israel and part of His continuing testimony to the nation of her eternal calling.

Part of understanding God’s plan of election, both for Israel and the nations, is to understand it so that we can partner with God in His plan. Paul’s understanding of Israel’s election in Romans 9 is much more than his understanding about whether individuals are saved by predestination or not. This is an important subject, but not Paul’s primary emphasis here. By understanding how God has worked in Israel’s election we can better understand how He works among His people.