

THE PLACE OF CHAPTERS 9 TO 11 IN ROMANS

These are weighty chapters. How do they fit into what St Paul is writing in the letter as a whole? In chapters 1 to 4 Paul has written about the person who through faith is justified. In the next four he shows what it means that the person who is justified will live. Before he writes about the life of the person who is justified through faith in chapters 12-13 he takes up the rejection of Israel. Why does he do this? Certainly he is personally involved in the question, but he does not take up the question for merely personal reasons.

It is useful to say what these chapters are not. They are not the chief passage in the Scriptures about election or predestination, although they discuss it. For that the reader should begin with chapter 8:28-30. They are not an attempt to show from the standpoint of reason that God's ways are just after all. Doing that is blasphemous, anyhow. They are not Paul's way of understanding the course of history, however much we might like to say that often the majority of people have fallen away, with only a small remnant left.

The vital point is that, since God made promises to Israel, and, since they had many advantages in the Old Testament, how was it possible for Israel to be rejected? Israel had been unfaithful, and rejected its own Messiah. Did that mean that God has gone back on the promises that He made to their fathers? Paul wants to show in this connection that there is no contradiction between the righteousness of faith and the promises of God.

He sets out three main arguments. The first is that God does everything entirely in His own way. Everything depends on whom He has chosen as the "children of promise." God gave His promises to Israel, and He determines in His own freedom to whom He gives His promises. He gave them to Isaac, not to Ishmael, and to Jacob, not to Esau. However, the basis for God's choice was not any merit in those whom He chose. God is free in both mercy and wrath. He chooses whom He wishes to, and He hardens some and rejects some. When God hardened Pharaoh's heart He showed His power, and through doing that He proclaimed His nature and His power to all the earth. Everything depends entirely on God's free grace. No human being can lay his claims before God. Israel for the most part had been rejected by God and become "vessels of wrath." Nevertheless, God had made new "vessels of mercy", comprising Jews who have become believers and large numbers of Gentiles. The promises belong only to those who believe, only to spiritual Israel; and these promises of God have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Rm 9:6-29). In spite of how it may appear, God has not withdrawn His promises.

Paul writes: ¹⁴ What shall we say, then? Surely there is no injustice on God's part? Certainly not! ¹⁵ For He says to Moses: "I shall be merciful to anyone to whom I am merciful; and I shall have compassion on anyone on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ Therefore it does not depend on the one who wills or the one who runs, but on God, who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I may display My power in you, and that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ Therefore He has mercy on the one on whom He wants to have mercy, and makes stubborn the one whom He wishes to make stubborn. ¹⁹ You will ask me, therefore, "Then why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" ²⁰ However, now, man, who are you to answer back to God? Surely the thing that is formed will not ask the one who has formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Or does not the potter have the right over his clay to make out of the same lump of clay one jar for a noble purpose and another for a lowly purpose?"

The second point is that Israel has gone against God by trying to achieve righteousness by way of works, and in so doing Israel has made itself responsible for its own rejection (Rm 9:30-10:21). If salvation had depended on what they wanted, and on their efforts, they would have been saved. There is a second reason why the righteousness of God is not contrary to His promises. Although God has made His promises depend on faith, Israel cannot share in God's promises because they have been seeking to gain righteousness by way of the Law. The Law has a double function, to demand righteousness, and to overthrow all human boasting. The coming of Christ has meant the termination of the Law, and begun something new. Therefore the reason why Israel does not confess the risen Christ as Lord lies entirely in itself.

The third reason why the rejection of Israel does not conflict with the promises of God is that God's rejection of Israel is not final. Rather, their very rejection has brought about the conditions for the final salvation of all spiritual Israel, from both Jews and Gentiles. God has not rejected His people. His rejection is not final, for three reasons. First, even now there is a remnant of Israel, which God has chosen, and which He has not rejected. Secondly, the fall of Israel has opened the way for the salvation of the Gentiles. That means something important, not only for the Gentiles, but also for Israel itself. Israel is God's cultivated olive tree, and the Gentiles who have become believers and are saved are like branches of a wild olive that have been grafted into that tree.

Paul writes: ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole dough. If the root is holy, so

are the branches. ¹⁷ But, if some of the branches have been broken off, and you, a wild olive, have been grafted in among them, and have become one who shares the rich sap from the root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast over the other branches. Moreover, if you do boast, consider that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ Therefore you will say: "Branches have been broken off in order that I may be grafted in." ²⁰ Right! They have been broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹ For if God has not spared the natural branches, be afraid that somehow He will not spare you, either. ²² Consider therefore how kind and how severe God is. He has been severe to those who have fallen, but He is kind to you, if you continue in His kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ If those people do not continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted in. For God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For, if you have been cut from the olive tree that is wild by nature, and have, contrary to nature, been grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!"

Thirdly, the Gentiles should also fear the freedom of God's grace, because no one at all may rely on himself and on his better position. The righteousness of faith and God's promises can be reconciled with the fact of Israel's rejection, because God's promises belong to those who believe, and Israel has refused to believe. However, the mystery is that Israel's responsibility and her tragedy has become the way to the salvation of all spiritual Israel. Although hardening has come, in part, upon Israel, that has opened the way for all spiritual Israel to be saved. Some of Israel according to the flesh may believe and be accepted. "For God has consigned all people to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon all" (Rm 11:32).