WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL?

In Romans 1–8, Paul has explained the significance of the good news about Jesus. His exposition of the good news has not yet answered what would have been a pressing question for Jewish Christians. What is the relationship between the story of Jesus and God’s plan for Israel? Paul answers this question in Romans 9–11.

He begins by surveying the Old Testament and discovering that someone may be ethnically related to the family of Abraham, but that doesn’t make them a genuine Israelite. Abraham had multiple children, but it was through the promised son Isaac that the “seed shall be called” (Romans 9:7). Paul deduces that being a descendant of Abraham is based on God’s promise rather than being a flesh descendant of Abraham. The concept is repeated in Jacob and Esau’s story (Romans 9:10–12).

The next section can be a bit confusing (Romans 9:13–23). One scholar has suggested that reading this section is like riding a bike. If you go too slow or stop, you will fall over, but if you keep moving, you can follow the argument. Paul is asserting (albeit in a way that seems foreign to us) the fact that God can do what He wants. It’s important to note that saying God can do what He wants is not the same as telling us what God wants to do. By asserting God’s freedom to do as He pleases, Paul is making it clear that God is not bound to save ethnic Israel simply because they are related to Abraham. He eventually gets around to telling us what it is that God wants to do. God wants to have mercy on those who will put their faith in Jesus (Romans 9:25–33; 10:9–13).
Write out Romans 10:9–13 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
DON'T TRIP

Have you ever been working on a problem and found yourself frustratingly stuck? No matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't make any progress, and then somebody shows up and effortlessly solves it. That can feel so frustrating!

That is just how some of the Jews who didn’t put their faith in Jesus felt about Paul’s gospel. Paul taught that we are all sinners and can’t be saved by our works (Romans 3:20–23). We can only be saved by faith in Jesus. The Jewish faith taught believers to work very hard and earnestly to pursue the righteousness of the law. Still, Israel had “not attained to the law of righteousness” (Romans 9:31). On the other hand, the Christians who weren’t pursuing righteousness found it, because they sought righteousness by faith in Christ rather than by works (Romans 9:30).

This created intense feelings of frustration. Many Jews considered Jesus a “stumbling stone” and a “rock of offense” (Romans 9:32, 33). They did not resonate with the idea that simple faith in Jesus was enough for righteousness and that works and dedication to conforming to God’s law could do nothing to save them.

How could these Jews make such a mistake? The effort to establish their own righteousness by obedience to the law reveals their ignorance of God’s righteousness (Romans 10:3). God’s righteousness is His holiness and perfection of character. God’s righteousness is higher than the highest human thought can reach. By underestimating the righteousness of God, the Jews imagined that they could reach the low standard of their own imagination. This is a fatal mistake. God’s righteousness, His perfection of character, is beyond our wildest imagination. When we understand the true beauty and holiness of God’s righteous character, then we will realize that no human effort could ever meet the infinite standard of an infinite God.

As a result of their ignorance of God’s righteousness, the unbelieving Jews sought to establish their own righteousness through obedience to the law. They failed to submit to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:3). To submit to the righteousness of God means to receive the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus. Because they thought they could achieve the righteousness of the law by their efforts, they saw no reason to submit to the righteousness of God as a gift.

Have you truly appreciated the beauty of God’s righteousness? Has this led you to trust less in self and pursue righteousness by faith rather than by the works of the law?
WHO IS ISRAEL?

What does Paul mean when he says that all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26)? Does he mean, as some have suggested, that at the end of time a wholesale revival will come up among the Jews and they will all be saved? Certainly not.

Earlier in the book of Romans, Paul was careful to define who was an authentic Israelite. Jewishness isn’t outward and physical, being defined by circumcision and ethnic identity (Romans 2:28). Instead, true Jewishness is determined by the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Romans 2:29). Being a true Jew is the result of the work of God, not the result of who your grandfather or grandmother is.

This is similar to Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:6, where he says, “Not all Israel . . . are of Israel.” Simply put, being a physical descendant of Abraham didn’t make you a part of the promised lineage. It was God’s promise that made you a part of the spiritual family of Abraham (Romans 9:8).

So what does Paul mean when he says all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26)? This is the punchline to an argument that begins in Romans 11:16–24. There, Paul likens Israel to a tree. That tree was made up of ethnic Israel. In that tree were many branches. Some of the ethnic descendants of Abraham (including Paul) were also spiritual descendants of Abraham, because they believed God’s promise. Other branches of that tree were only ethnic Israel, because they didn’t embrace their spiritual calling to believe God’s promise in Christ. The ethnic descendants of Abraham who didn’t believe were broken off the tree of Israel (Romans 11:17, 20). Gentiles who believed were branches grafted into the tree of Israel (Romans 11:17).

Our spiritual status is not unchangeable. Breaking branches off or grafting them in isn’t necessarily permanent. We can change our status by faith or by abandoning the faith. If those who were broken off want to exercise faith, they can be grafted back into Israel (Romans 11:23). Additionally, if those who were grafted in boast of Jesus and then abandon the faith, they will be broken off (Romans 11:20, 21). When the full number of the Gentiles are grafted into the tree of spiritual Israel (Romans 11:25), then all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).

So what does Paul mean when he says all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26)? He means that when all the Gentiles who will ever put their faith in Jesus, along with all the Jews who will ever put their trust in Jesus, have finally put their trust in Jesus, then all of true Israel will be saved.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Isaiah 56:6–8
Isaiah 65:1, 2
Hosea 2:23
1 Peter 2:9–10

What other verses come to mind in connection with the salvation of Israel and of the Gentiles?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 9–11.
THE END OF THE LAW?

What does Paul mean when he says Christ is the end (telos) of the law (Romans 10:4)? Does he mean that Christ has terminated God’s law? The underlying Greek word telos, translated “end,” rarely means termination. For example, James speaks of the telos (end) of the Lord (James 5:11, KJV). “End” in this context doesn’t mean the termination of the Lord. It means the end of the purpose of the Lord, as it is translated in the English Standard Version. Similarly, Peter speaks of the telos (end) of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9). Peter is not talking about the elimination of our faith. He is teaching about the “end result” of our faith, which is our salvation, as it is translated in the New International Version.

When Paul says that Christ is the telos (end) of the law (Romans 10:4), he is teaching that Christ was the intended outcome of the law. Again, according to the New International Version, Christ is the culmination of the law. Jesus didn’t terminate the law. Everything the law said culminated in Jesus. Jesus was the final fulfillment of the law. Every prediction it ever made came to completion in Christ. This is the universal teaching of the New Testament. According to Jesus, all the Scriptures are about Him (John 5:39). After His resurrection, Jesus explained to His disciples that all Scripture is about Him (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45). Jesus is the culmination of everything the law ever said or taught.

The good news is that, as a result of Jesus’ coming, everyone who believes in Him is righteous (Romans 10:4). Someone might object and say, doesn’t the Old Testament indicate that it’s the person who does the law who will live (Romans 10:5; Leviticus 18:5)? It does say that, but follow Paul’s argument. The law points to Jesus, and the law says, do the law and you will live. If the law culminates in Jesus, then doing the law and living must be understood to mean, “Believe in the one the law is all about, and you will live.” If you believe in Jesus, you will live. Righteousness isn’t in heaven, and it isn’t buried in an abyss (Romans 10:6–8). The universal message of Scripture is that salvation doesn’t come by some Herculean effort. It is by faith in a saving God.

“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:9, 10).

Where do you see Jesus in Romans 9–11?

What can you share with those who feel that salvation is hard to access?

What is He saying to you through these texts?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?
HOW CAN THEY HEAR?

“A neglected work remains to be done, and we are to repent of our indifference toward this work, and pray for spiritual discernment to see and to sense, as we should, its urgent needs. To us has been entrusted enlightening, saving truth. All about us are multitudes who have never yet been enlightened. To these we must proclaim the lifesaving truths of the third angel’s message. We are to hunt for souls, laboring with all diligence to communicate to others that which is for their eternal welfare.

“The unwarned multitudes are fast becoming the sport of the evil one. Satan is leading them into many forms of folly and self-pleasing. Many are seeking for that which is novel and startling; their minds are far from God and the truths of His Word. At this time, when the enemy is working as never before to engross the minds of men and women, and turn them from the truth, we should be laboring with increasing activity in the highways and also in the byways. Diligently, interestedly, we are to proclaim the last message of mercy in the cities—the highways—and the work is not to end there, but is to extend into the surrounding settlements and in the country districts—into the byways and the hedges. All classes are to be reached. As we labor, we shall meet with various nationalities. None are to be passed by, unwarned. The Lord Jesus was the gift of God to the entire world—not to the higher classes alone, and not to any one nationality, to the exclusion of others. His saving grace encircles the whole world. Whosoever will may drink of the water of life freely. ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ [Acts 2:21.] But there is earnest work to be done. The gospel invitation is to be given in every place, for ‘how . . . shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they hear without a preacher?’ [Romans 10:14.]

“The Lord desires His people to arise and do their appointed work. The responsibility rests not upon the ministry alone. The lay members of the church are to share the burdens of soul saving. . . .

“The Lord now calls upon those who have a knowledge of the truth for this time to arouse from their lethargy and become true missionaries in His service. Time is short, and the Lord’s work must be done without further delay.”

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

In what ways does the story of Israel parallel the story of our church?

How can understanding God’s perfectly righteous and holy character protect us from self-righteousness?

Do you feel that Paul makes salvation too easy when he says that all we have to do is confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead? Is there more to it?

When you read the Old Testament, do you see the story of Jesus foreshadowed? If so, what are some examples?

Does the idea that God can prune branches out of His spiritual family make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

Have you felt a personal responsibility to share the gospel? If so, how have you done it?